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# Author's Note

[image]

**Caution: My knowledge is poor on the subject of cancer. I will not be able to state perfect facts on it because I have never been diagnosed with it. I do not write this on experience, only as a fanfiction of John Green's The Fault in Our Stars and Tui T. Sutherland's Wings of Fire. Chronic lymphocytic leukemia is what Glory will be diagnosed with, and I assure you that I know nothing about it in general and my writing on it will be very poor. I apologize, I have researched it the best I can.**

# PART 1

[image]

☆Glory☆

*"The fault, dear Brutus is not in our stars / But in ourselves"*

-<Julius Caesar>, Shakespeare

☆

# [1] Okay

[image]

☆Glory☆

In first grade, before Deathbringer Black came, cancer was my best friend.

Well, maybe best friends don't kill off the other.

And when you live half of your life lying on a hospital bed thinking about death, you don't exactly have a lot of time or opportunities to make friends.

It was just simply one of my traits, if I can call it that. Glory Bright, the girl with leukemia. The girl who misses school because she has to go to the hospital. The girl whose parents abandoned her after hearing the possibility of her disease and who, now, lives with her very rich grandmother.

The girl whose dad died in a car crash.

Complicated? Yes.

Everywhere I went, there were whispers. There were pity. There were curiosity. And I hated it all.

Cancer wasn't a disease I had- it was something had controlled my life. It wasn't simply a trait, it defined me entirely. The people that would have liked me avoided me after hearing about cancer. The people that wouldn't, stayed because it somehow made them better people.

And then, Deathbringer Black came. The boy with black hair and dark, dark eyes. We met in elementary school, when he had recently moved from a city from Minnesota.

At first, I didn't like him. He was too outgoing, too loud and friendly, to match my personality, which was to stay away from

everyone because I was simply anti-social.

That was one of the side affects of cancer. That was one of the side affects of dying.

I always sat outside under a pine tree, breathing in, breathing out. And nobody tried to pick up a conversation with me there. So it became something like my spot until I graduated elementary school.

Then I realized something: He kept staring at me. Deathbringer Black. Even at his young age, he knew how to play at life. He excelled it. Within a week, he had a string of girls drooling over him. He had a lot of friends. He was just popular- he was made to be.

So why would he stare at me? There was only one explanation: cancer. At first, I felt insulted because I figured he was just staring at me because maybe he felt sorry for me. Just like everyone else.

But he kept staring and staring and staring until I felt shy. And curious.

After a few days, when I just couldn't take it anymore, I went up to him. I remember that day, I had a ribbon on my hair. And a black dress, as dark as his eyes.

"If you are going to keep staring at me, we might as well be friends," I said shortly, putting my hand out to him, hoping he would accept my friendship and shake it. I stared into his eyes confidently, but to say the truth, I was nervous out of my mind.

He didn't hold back. "Okay."

"Okay."

He grinned. "Okay."

I raised an eyebrow. "Is this it? I never had a friend before," I admitted. "So there's no, like, promising to stay friends forever? Like a vow or anything? This is it?"

Deathbringer shugged. "Nothing is forever. Besides..."

I stared at his hand shaking mine. Suddenly, I felt proud. Nothing was forever, yes, but he was there. Shaking hands with me, Glory Bright, over all the others.

That was when I realized that I was lucky after all. That my life didn't exist just to end.

That was when I became friends with Deathbringer Black.

"Besides what?" I demanded.

Deathbringer leaned in close, whispering in my ear. A secret. A secret for just the two of us, because only two can play this game.

And that whisper was what brought us together into an unbreakable friendship.

"Maybe 'okay' will be our always."

☆

# [2] Bullies

[image] [image]

☆Glory☆

In second grade, Deathbringer got in trouble for getting into a fist fight.

The trouble, in the end, was me. He was popular, I was not. He always hung out with a group of boys, and once or twice, a girl played with them. She had brown hair (I can't remember her name), was one of his closest friends when I wasn't around.

The thing was, she was pretty cool. She sometimes braided my hair when she was talking to Deathbringer at recess. She would treat me like a normal girl, laughed when I joked, sometimes included me when we played in the playground.

But that day in second grade, a lot changed. It was Valentine's Day, and although we were really young, she liked Deathbringer. It wasn't much- probably a crush- but she seemed serious about it. She confessed to me and the other girls that she liked him, and that she had made the chocolate herself, with the help of her brother.

She giggled and chickened out two times, but when her friends pushed her towards him, she confessed her feelings and gave him her chocolate, a blush on her face.

Deathbringer refused her chocolate. He walked out of the classroom, ignoring everyone's disbelief, and soon started to act like she didn't exist.

Even then, he had that bad habit. He said he didn't want anyone that liked him as his friend, because if he stayed friendly with them, it would just hurt them. He sounded so angry, so determined, so sad, that I had no choice but to agree.

Once, when she saw me playing with Deathbringer like I always did

in recess, she asked me to ask him what was wrong. I explained the reason he didn't want to be around her.

"Why?" She kept saying. She started to cry, her chubby fingers wiping her tears away. "I didn't do anything! Tell him I don't like him anymore, I just want to stay friends-"

"I'll try to talk to him, stop crying, okay?" I tried to comfort her, trying to put my arms around her. I tried to give her my handkerchief (Grandmother always taught me to always have one ever since I was young), but she refused.

I guess she had told her older brother before that day in the playground- a boy in fourth grade- and when he saw his little sister crying, with a girl he had been told about talking to her when she kept trying to push something away, I'm sure he got the wrong idea.

He came running to us. "Hey! You! What are you doing with my sister?"

I was scared of big boys then, so I stammered, probably sounding suspicious. "What? N-nothing!"

He frowned. "Aren't you the girl that always play with the boy that my sister has a crush on?" Then he realized who I really was. "Oh. The one with *cancer*."

The girl ran to her brother, hugging him, sobbing in his arms. I don't blame him for the bullying that followed. He was probably protective of his sister, wanted to made her feel better, blamed me for her sadness. That's why he left his buddy alone to bully me. It was wrong, but I can understand.

He looked at his friends for help, and one of his friends came up to me. "This is the girl that made you cry?" He sneered. "What did you do, give her your cancer cooties?"

"I didn't d-do-" I tried to protest. "Cancer isn't-"

He snatched a ribbon in my hair. "It's okay. We'll just take this."

That ribbon was *the* ribbon. I used to wear it around everywhere. It

was something I had gotten as a gift when I was younger. When he took it like a toy, I immediately snatched it back, angry.

That was when he pushed me. It wasn't very hard, but I was weak. My arm stung.

The crying got louder. The girl's brother stared at us in disbelief. The friend sneered. And in the busy playground, Deathbringer was coming up to me, shouting my name.

The boy took the ribbon out of my hands. "Why, you want this? You made my friend's sister cry. You know, you won't need it anyway, you have cancer. Aren't you going to die soon?"

I stared at him in shock. *You won't need it anyway ... you have cancer...aren't you going to die soon...*

*...does that mean I don't deserve anything?*

*...because I'm going to die?*

And that was when Deathbringer jumped on the fourth grader, throwing the first punch.

☆

Of course, he was the one that got hit the most. No matter how strong he was, he was in second grade. He was no match for a big fourth grader.

In the next class, he showed up with bruises all over his face. He was pressing ice on them, and a band aid on his arm. Everyone thought it was cool. I just looked at him apologetically.

I tried to help him by explaining the situation to the teacher. I told the teacher the words the fourth grader had said to me, that Deathbringed had just gotten angry and that he was just trying to defend a friend.

I also showed the teacher my bruises I got when I had been pushed to the ground.

Thankfully, Deathbringer just got detention- which was just staying in class in recess.

A few days later, in lunch, without a word, he slipped a small ribbon into my pocket.

"Don't let big bullies get to you," he tried to growl in a deep voice, which was funny because he was so young, and he had all kinds of bruises that he had gotten because he had left the big bullies get to *him*.

I stared at him, stared at my ribbon, and bursted out laughing. He turned to look at me in disbelief. Everyone else stared at us.

Then Deathbringer started laughing, and everyone else laughed because Deathbringer laughed. Soon, tears were streaming down our faces, our faces red.

"Are you okay?" I managed to choke out between laughs.

"Are you?" He snorted, gripping his stomach.

"My grandmother-" I laughed some more- "is going to pay-" I shook uncontrollably- "for your hospital bills. She says go to the- AHAHAHA- hospital-"

He stared at me and nodded, shouting with laughter. Tears were streaming from his eyes.

And then, between laughs, I reached out, and he took my hand, and we hugged, our shoulders shaking with laughter. Everyone joined, although they didn't understand why everything was so funny.

That was the first time he stood up for me when I needed him. He would do it again and again as we got older. When I almost drowned in the ocean when I was in seventh grade. When girls that got jealous of our friendship tried to slap me in the face.

That was when I knew he would do anything, how he would put himself between me and death if he could.

☆

**When you search "bullying" and "cancer," you can read an article where a boy with cancer got bullied just because he had cancer. His classmates doubted he had cancer and when shown the scars, one said that he had made them on his own for attention.**

**He got things stolen, and when confronted, his classmates said he didn't need it because he had cancer, and because he would die anyway .**

**Please acknowledge the fact that this is true- people get bullied because of cancer. I just wanted to raise awareness of this fact.**

# [3] Someone Like Us

[image]

*"Who do you want to be when you grow up?"*

*"I want to be beautiful, like you!"*

*The woman smiled. She motioned with her hand, like shooing the compliment away, like she got it a thousand times a day. Perhaps she did. But she flushed just the same, flattered nevertheless. She loved doing it, flattering her mother , seeing the blush on her cheeks.*

*The woman smiled, bending down, reaching out and tucking a lock of golden hair behind Glory's ear. "Your hair is beautiful. Girls should always have long hair." She paused. " Maybe when you're a little bit older, I'll introduce you to my world."*

*It sounded beautiful, this women's world, when though she knew nothing about it. And she loved every single part of her, to her fashionable clothes to her pale face. It made her cough when Glory kissed her on he cheek, the powder and the cream- but it was a part of the woman, a small piece of something before she left months at a time.*

*"You're beautiful," the woman repeated again. "That's all that matters."*

*Those were the happy times, innocent times, full of laughter and hope.*

*It didn't last.*

~

☆Glory☆

I dyed my hair rainbow the day the girls came up to me in fifth grade and asked why I didn't wear makeup.

"Your eyes are big," one of the girls, Alice, said. She wasn't bad herself, I remember- she had those pretty blue eyes and light dirty blonde hair. She also became famous for that one time she picked a

fight with Deathbringer (when they used to date) about why she couldn't sit with him in lunch, although she had no way of knowing it then. "Your hair is pretty, but it would be prettier if it were longer."

"I can give you a lipstick if you want. It's just a couple dollars," one of Alice's friends said.

I refused. And I started dyeing my hair. I dyed it black, and then red, and then green, and then blue.

Deathbringer always seemed excited to pick out the color. And I always did the one he picked.

Nothing else much happened in fourth grade, except that one time in school. Deathbringer and I were holding hands, because that's what we did back then so we couldn't get lost in the lunch line. We were talking about something- something related to my hair color- when the kids stopped us.

"Why are you holding hands?" The boy asked suspiciously.

Deathbringer held it even tighter when I tried to let it go in embarrassment. "Why is that any of your business?" He challenged, clenching his other hand into a fist.

"Oooh," the girl next to him said. "Deathbringer and Glory are daaaaating."

"No, we're not!" I shouted in anger. I managed to shake his hand off, ignoring his hurt expression. "We're holding hands so we don't get lost in line!"

But it was too late then. Everyone was butting in, wanting to know what the fuss was all about. "Deathbringer and Glory are DATING?"

I opened my mouth to say we weren't, to prove them wrong, to list all the girl friends Deathbringer had, how we were just friends- but just as it was about to tumble out, something stopped me.

"But if they like each other and kiss, would Deathbringer get cancer too?" One of the voices said. "Why would someone like him date

someone like *her*?"

That stopped the river of words I wanted to say to prove them wrong. I stood there in disbelief and time seemed to stop, and I was just staring at the girl, wanting to ask her what she meant.

I couldn't. I was too scared of the answer.

So I just ran away from the whole scene, running outside, slamming the door behind me, running to the tree, ignoring everyone's shouts.

*What is someone like him and what is someone like me?*

*What's the difference?*

*Gender? Face? Personality?*

*Cancer?*

I wasn't trying to, but I was sobbing, under that tree I loved so much, crying until my shoulders shook. I fell face first, and I was sobbing like a little baby, hoping somebody would comfort me. I don't know how long I cried, but it didn't seem to stop.

Then he came like an angel, crossing the line I had made in the sand of our friendship, scared that he would hurt me. We hadn't been true friends before then, before he carefully crossed the line and made another. And we were closer. That was the first step.

He walked up to me calmly, rested a hand on my shoulder. He didn't say anything. He just sat there, letting me know what he was beside me, that he understood, that he was sorry, that he was my friend.

"Maybe we should stop being friends because they're making rumors about us and you would be better off without me and a lot of people would like to be your friend and I don't want to cause trouble," I said in one breath, trying to dry the tears that kept coming.

"That's all true," he admitted. "But who cares what they think?"

"I don't care what they think," I said defensively.

"If you never cared you would have kept your hair long and stop dyeing it because everyone gives you weird looks," Deathbringer argued. "You're rebelling because you care."

I couldn't say anything against that. Then my young self pondered over the question. "Do you think I should grow my hair?"

He looked at me suspiciously. "So you can have more friends?"

"No. I want to let it go." I wiped my tears with my sleeve, something my grandmother would never approve of. "What you say is true. I'll stop rebelling and I'll stop caring."

"I never minded. Who cares about the length of your hair or the color of it? You're you, and that's what I like. I don't mind the rest. And I don't care what everyone else think."

"But you know...you don't care because you have nothing to lose," I contradicted. "You're loud and bubbly and you have a lot of friends no matter what. You never care but you're what everyone like. You just fit right in. Some of us have to make ourselves into what people want."

He just stared at me. I knew he didn't get what I said. He did later, he told me- but he didn't get it then. He had always fit right in, couldn't imagine not fitting in. That was how he was back then.

*Somebody like you and somebody like me.*

We were different. We had always been different. We didn't quite understand one another then. We didn't know each other's stories, our secrets.

No. But we shared a link in that moment, a step to understanding each other, erasing one line, getting closer, drawing another. And someday we would get to the point where we were just together, with no line separating us. Hopefully.

"You know, I-" He stopped. Then he looked at me. Then at the ground. "Let's get back inside."

"Okay," I said.

"Okay," he said with a grin.

"Okay," I said, punching his arm playfully. Soon after, we were running to lunch.

*Maybe okay can be our always.*

We could have held hands, but we didn't. I could tell he wanted to. But he respected my choice.

The truth was that I was scared, that I didn't know what was somebody like him and I didn't know what was somebody like me.

We never held hands again in school after that.

☆

# [4] Greatness

[image]

☆Glory☆

It was in middle school when I developed my crush for Deathbringer.

Before that, he and I were just friends. We didn't have a care in the world- we ran around, told jokes, studied together, and did many others things that other people do.

But as we got into middle school, the people around us were changing. The girls were paying more attention to boys, and one of the most popular boys (ranked second, apparently) was Deathbringer.

It was in seventh or eighth grade when Deathbeinger became obsessed with a girl. *Really* obsessed. Usually, he just played around. I could tell his heart wasn't in it. He just dated to get his mind off things, and when he got bored, he stopped for a while.

The process went like this: Deathbringer targeted a few girls at a time. They all had somewhat similar features- brown or black hair, high nose, big eyes, all of them about the same height. And they were all meaningless to him.

Many tried hard not to fall into his trap- but when they did, they fell hard. They confessed their feelings and wanted to be his girlfriend- and that was when he stopped giving them any attention and pretended that they didn't exist. By confessing, their friendship was ruined.

The one heart that he didn't break, however, was Greatness Night. She wasn't particularly beautiful. But I give her this: she had extremely rare features. I can't describe it perfectly even if I tried, but she was a half American, half Asian girl. She had beautiful slanted eyes, and her hair was cut short up to her neck. Her skin

was pale and she had some sort of fierce attitude that the many girls in our school couldn't dream of having.

At first, when Deathbringer began targeting her, I didn't mind. I had told him many times before that I was sick of his playing with girls, but he wouldn't stop. It wasn't that he was particularly wanting girlfriends- it was that the girls fell for him, and by doing that, they ruined the little friendship they had.

I never paid attention to his girlfriends, not much. I couldn't remember who was his first, and I didn't really care then. He was going through something, but that something didn't hurt him, and did not concern me.

That changed when he met Greatness. When we were having a sleepover at my house, he told me all the details: Greatness didn't play hard to get, like all the other girls. One day, when they were at some kid's party together, instead of waiting for him to approach her, she approached him.

I wasn't interested then, so I barely listened. He did this a lot- told me about his girlfriends, how he met them, and why he dated them. Maybe he just needed someone to talk to. Maybe he needed to talk about something other than his family.

He always broke it off, though. He wasn't in love. We were in middle school, after all- nobody really liked anyone. I wasn't worried.

But Greatness- she was different.

She and Deathbringer talked at the party. Soon, they were going out.

But they weren't breaking up. They were walking in an invisible path, something that didn't include anyone except the two of them.

I noticed it in the little things: how he smiled when he texted her, how they held hands in the hallway, how his visits to my house became less and less frequent.

"Do you like Greatness?" I asked one day in lunch, right before the

day Greatness came to sit with us.

Deathbringer grinned and his cheeks were flushing. That was relatively new, too. I gaped at him.

"She's fun to hang around with," Deathbringer said. I was starting to dislike this new boy- I hated how vulnerable he was, how easily breakable. I could see right through him, and he was letting me.

The next day, he invited Greatness to our table. For six years, we had shared a table together, just us. Nobody interfered. Many tried to, mostly girls. Deathbringer refused.

But his relationship with Greatness was slowly wrecking our friendship apart. And I was just watching, unable to do anything, hoping that they would break up and that we would be friends again.

The next day, Greatness sat at our table. That was when I realized that our friendship would never be the same again. That was when I realized that I had lost Deathbringer.

I could only watch, too late, as Greatness slowly replaced the part I used to have in Deathbringer's life, until I only became an echo. And it almost seemed like Deathbringer was letting her.

That was when I started to love him. Maybe I had ever since the day I approached him. I never knew until then, until I stared open-mouthed as Deathbringer held her hand, a small grin on his face, just like the one he used to give me.

And she smiled right back, slowly replacing the part I used to play, the light in her eyes matching mine, until all I had was an echo of the friendship Deathbringer and I used to have.

☆

# [5] Vulnerability

[image]

☆Glory☆

Vulnerability.

One of the things that brought me and Deathbringer closer was vulnerability.

People tend to be drawn to each other when they are vulnerable. And thankfully, we both covered each other's scars and bruises. We both took care of each other, loved each other like brother and sister.

The thing is, though, the ones that hurt you the most are the ones closest to you.

The closer you get, the more vulnerable you get.

Maybe I had known my love for Deathbringer before he started a relationship with Greatness. Maybe I had known, deep down, how much he mattered to me, both as a friend and partner.

As they say, you realize stuff like that a little too late.

But I was also cautious of Deathbringer- I had seen him throw girls away like mere objects, enjoying their attention and tossing them away from him when he was finished. It wasn't his best trait, but I understood why he did what he did. But we'll get to that later.

Friendship with Deathbringer was a big risk. One wrong move and the entire thing will crack in half, leaving nothing. That was why you had to plan your moves very carefully- and that was one of the things I liked most about being friends with him.

Bringer of death and glory. They somehow matched. In order for there to be glory, there was a need for death. Because for someone to rise, someone needed to fall.

That was why we matched. We understood each other- death and glory. But holding onto each other was a big risk for all of us, because one wrong move will leave us falling apart.

As much as I understood Deathbringer, I couldn't understand him fully. Because even if you know a person better than you know yourself, there is still a part of that person that you will never be able to know.

Friendship is a beautiful thing. And the stronger it is, more fragile it is. One right move can make it stronger, but one wrong move and it can bring everything apart.

The three little words I wanted to tell him- *I love you*- could end up with him turning his back over me, deciding that he didn't want me, realizing that I was like the other girls- the ones that fell for his beautiful and dangerous trap. I planned to figure out a way to make him fall in love with me, to be so desperate in need of me that he would never throw me away.

But I was too late.

Because Greatness, she was a step before me. And it hurt, seeing him with another girl, watching him fall in love. Watching them laugh in lunch, watching them hold hands in the hallway, watching them grin when their eyes met in class.

That was probably why, when a girl named Tsunami offered me to sit at her lunch table a few days after Greatness and Deathbringer started dating, I immediately accepted.

☆

Tsunami was the kind of a girl that you hate at first sight, and then like immediately after.

The first time I met her, I immediately hated her.

The first two things I noticed when I first met her: she was tall, and she had frightening blue eyes.

The thing that made you cautious of her was those bright blue eyes.

They signaled dangerous the moment you laid eyes on them. They made you feel overwhelmed and made you look away, afraid.

She moved to our school at the beginning of high school, and she immediately slid into the group of theater geeks. I had met her once or twice on the hallway, but the thing that brought us together was me joining the Theater Group.

Tsunami was the leader of the group, despite having joined it for a short time. Nobody complained, though, because you could see that she was a born leader.

I joined the Theater Group a little before Greatness and Deathbringer started dating. I guess our friendship was doing pretty good then, and he was even jealous when I told him I was joining the Group- he was protective of me then.

"Glory."

"Here," I said, raising my hand.

Tsunami nodded. She stared at me for a second, and I could just see her mind passing over the thought, *leukemia.* But her gaze turned to the person behind me after a few seconds. Her eyes widened in surprise.

"Starflight? You're *here*?" Tsunami gasped in pure surprise. "Not the math bowl or some scientific group that studies the end to viruses? Not a group made of Harvard professors that makes you solve a complex math problem and talk about the ways to solve the Pytagoras Theorem?"

The boy named Starflight sighed, waving his hand. He was wearing a eyepatch over one eye, and his other was rolling in annoyance. "Yes, Tsunami, because unlike your very narrow thoughts, intelligent people don't always sit by their desks wondering the different ways to prove how the width square multiplied by the length square of a right triangle results in the length of the hypotenuse squared. Because some of us actually enjoy having a hobby of acting like other people in a stage front of PEOPLE WE DON'T KNOW. STOP ACTING LIKE YOU DIDN'T FORCE ME TO DO

THIS." The black haired boy shouted, then sighed as Tsunami moved on innocently to a different name.

Tsunami finished taking attendance, and grinned. "Are you ready kids?"

I heard someone behind me whisper, "Aye, aye, captain," and snorted.

"Our play will be something spectacular- absolutely heartbreaking and deep at the same time!"

I tapped my foot and stared at the hanging on the opposite wall of the stage. Ten minutes left.

"*Gone with the Wind!"* A girl beside Tsunami said. She was short and a little chubby, her golden hair shining in the lights. "A romantic tragedy that ends in a hopeful sunset for a better future- just what we need!"

"A classic!" Tsunami added, her voice getting louder. She linked her arms with the smaller girl beside her, who seemed even smaller next to Tsunami. They whirled around the stage like mad women, shouting, "tomorrow is another day!!"

That was the moment I decided that I liked Tsunami.

☆

# [6] The Play

[image]

*"Mother!"*

*She ran down the street, chasing the black limousine. Her short, weak legs eventually gave out, and she fell on the concrete road, her tears splashing on them.*

*She felt blood welling up her knees and elbows. She heard her grandmother ordering the guards to get to her, but all she could feel was the turning of the wheel as her mother drove away.*

*"Mother!" She cried. She reached out a small hand to the disappearing car, her sight foggy with tears.*

*As if it couldn't hear her cries, the black van just drove away.*

~

☆Glory☆

"Tsunami, are you going to eat that, or what?"

"Clay, the Hot Dog Man," Tsunami snickers as she chucks him her hotdog. "So, Glory, what's up with you leaving the famous lunch table? I mean, I did ask you if you wanted to sit with us. But like, you must have had a reason."

So that was what she was wondering about. That was what most people tended to ask about me- cancer and Deathbringer. "Nothing much. I just got tired of sitting there with those two lovebirds." I motion at Deathbringer and Greatness. "Thanks for having me."

"So, what's up with you?" Sunny, the smaller girl, says with a smile, rainbow braces flashing. They seem a little forced, like a smile people have when talking to a girl with cancer. I can almost read her mind: *I pity her so much.* Almost everyone I talk to believe that their lives will outlast mine. They're probably true.

Tsunami nods. "What's your story?"

"You can't just ask what happened to her randomly, Tsunami!" Starflight gives her a look. Then he sees me staring at him and shuts his mouth.

I've heard that a lot. They're not talking about Deathbringer, so it must be about cancer. I take a deep breath. "I was diagnosed with chronic myelogenous leukemia when I was in elementary school." Tsunami's eyes soften, and I'm almost surprised because she seems like a person that *cannot* soften.

Sunny, in turn, raises her eyebrows as if she is surprised. "Woah. Not your cancer story, your life story. What kind of food do you like? Do you do any sports?"

"Oh." I start to feel embarrassed, and I don't know whether to be glad or angry at myself. So I focus on opening my lunch box. "I don't do much sports, but I walk when I can." I smile. "I have a sloth named Silver."

"What?" The girl next to Clay gasps. "You have a *sloth* as a pet?"

"Um, yeah." I peel my banana. "My grandmother got her for me when I was younger."

"Are you interested in swimming?" Tsunami shares a look with Sunny. "If you are, maybe we can swim at my house. Or go to the swimming pool."

"There's a really hot guy there, in Tsunami's own words." Sunny wiggles her eyebrows. It's like her eyebrows are their own thing- they move so frequently that it's almost fascinating. "And his name is Whirlpool."

"Do NOT do that to him!" Tsunami groans. "Sunny, you're *evil*. How can you *ever* compare Riptide with *that* piece of junk?"

"Both of them go to Sea High, and Whirlpool leaves Tsunami these stalker messages every week. They're destined to be together." Starflight snorts when Sunny finishes. Tsunami hits him with her mayonaise.

"You should be thankful that I have known you since first grade, or I swear I would have thrown up on you for saying such things." Tsunami gags, and Clay laughs.

"You guys have known each other since first grade?"

"Yup. Me and Sunny are both from rich families. That's why we're SO MUCH BETTER THAN EVERYONE." She flips her hair back with a crazy grin. "AHAHAHAHAAHAHAHA. But, you know what? I think I have seen your grandmother at parties."

"You know who my grandmother is?" I repeat, panicked. "But she never goes outside."

"She and my mother have some history, I saw her when I was really young." Tsunami shrugs when I open my mouth in surprise. "I heard you were adopted. Or is that an area I shouldn't talk about?" Her cheek flushes, her entire face panicked.

I try not to sigh in relief. "No, it's okay. Yeah, I'm adopted." *Nobody knows.*

"Glory." Someone taps my shoulder. I look up and see Deathbringer, and his dark, dark eyes meet mine. Afraid that he will see my blush, I quickly look at my lunch box.

"What?"

"Why did you move your lunch table without telling me?" He sounds genuinely hurt, which pleases a dark side of me. "Not that you have to tell me everything you do, but-Hi, Starflight."

"You guys know each other?" Tsunami seems confused.

"We're distant cousins." Starflight nods at him, which makes me genuinely surprised. News, Deathbringer has distant cousins. Does that mean he knows about Deathbringer's uncle?
Starflight looks at me and raises an eyebrow. I try to sign that I want to stay, and I guess it works, because he immediately shoos Deathbringer away. "Glory was discussing about the play with us, we'll need her here for a while."

I stare at him, blinking. *Thank you.* He shrugs at me. "Yeah," I add after a short pause. Also breaking news: Starflight, the boy with one eye, and I, the girl with leukemia, make a good team. "We had a try out today and I wanted to talk about it. Where's Greatness?"

"She's right over there." Deathbringer stares at me for a moment. I can tell he wants to talk to me, but it is probably overshadowed by the longing to sit by his girlfriend at lunch. "Well, have a good lunch. Did you get a role?"

"I don't know yet." He's giving me attention, and I'm enjoying it despite myself. I know I shouldn't- he has a girlfriend, after all- but it's not like I can help what I feel. I'm not going to do anything, either. "Maybe Melanie, one of the main characters, if I'm aiming high. I actually liked it, though. It's going to be really fun."

"Melanie? Who is that?" Deathbringer scratches his head innocently.

"Do NOT act so cool that you don't know Gone with the Wind!" I cry out hotly, unaware of the other people and the fact Deathbringer has a girlfriend, which usually means we must stay a few feet apart at school. "You hopeless romantic. You cried when Scarlett begged Rhett to come back! You even tried to write a second novel in sixth grade just to realize you sucked at writing! We made a fanclub! You BETRAYER!"

The entire crowd of the lunch table looks at the both of us, their eyes switching back and forth as if looking at a pingpong match.

"Okay, okay, of course I know Gone with the Wind! And my undying love for the book and the movie affected you *so much* that you *just* had to go to try outs for the *exact* play." He grabs one of my brocolli before I can hit his hand away. "You can express your undying gratitude to me later. I'll wait." Nobody tells him that the play was decided after I decided to join. Deathbringer Black believes what he wants, and nobody tells him otherwise.

"It'll take a while." Deathbringer snorts and waves at me as he walks back to his own lunch table.

Tsunami stares at me for a second after I turn back to my lunch.

Then she slowly opens her mouth. "Who would have guessed, Deathbringer Black a Gone with the Wind geek?"

Sunny covers her mouth. "And Glory, too."

Tsunami bangs the lunch table. "It is officially decided. Glory Bright, you are invited to our lunch table. Every day of the week. Every year. You are also invited to my very house today, which is very very, *very* rare. Anything for a fellow Gone with the Wind geek. The fact you love the book makes my rebellious heart set on fire." She dramatically motions with her orange, smiling slightly when Sunny and Clay join in. Starflight just rolls his eyes. I'm starting to like this guy. "And, of course, you seem pretty cool."

"Anybody against this new statement?" Sunny looks around the table.

No one raises their hand.

# [7] Hating

[image]

**Disclaimer: Gone with the Wind is a story about a main character, Scarlett O'Hara, and two love interests, Ashley and Rhett. Ashley is married to Melanie (not by his choice in the beginning), and Rhett is a "bad boy" kind of a character that is very complicated, also in love with Scarlett. The book takes time in the period of the Civil War.**

☆Glory☆

Oh.

My.

God.

*Does she do that on purpose?*

Melanie Hamilton from the Gone with the Wind. She has applied for her role. I didn't even know she was interested in acting, and my mind makes up all kinds of scenarios in my head where Greatness is set up as this very evil person that enjoys taking everything I want away. And, looking at the things she actually did take away from me, it almost seems true.

"Greatness Night, you can come up."

The lights are too bright, too beautiful, when Greatness comes up stage. She has even matched the theme with a blue dress that comes up to her knees, and I can almost understand why Deathbriger has fallen in love with this crazy girl with red lipstick. Her usual sparkling makeup is replaced with nothing- she looks calm and collected.

"Perhaps we should start with the scene where Ashley is saved by Rhett, who acts like they're both drunk to hide that Ashley is shot,"

Tsunami suggests. The teacher, Ms. Kestrel, nods, and motions the numbers 7 and 4, the page number.

"Start!" Tsunami acts as Rhett Butler with Starflight beside her, attempting to play Ashley by the teacher's commands. He looks pained, which is actually appropriate in the scene. Beside me, Sunny snorts at his face.

Greatness's expression turns cold, and she holds her hands together, her lips pressed tightly. "So, you've got my husband intoxicated again, Captain Butler."

Starflight attempts acting drunk, looking at the script with a puzzled expression. He waves his hands around awkwardly. "AHHHH. Intoxicated noises. AHHH."

"Hey, Mrs. Wilkes!" Tsunami staggers so realistically that she falls. The crowd bursts out laughing. "OW!"

"WHY AREN'T YOU TAKING THIS SERIOUSLY?" Mrs. Kestrel yells with her microphone. "ACT DECENTLY FOR ONCE, FOR GOD'S SAKE!"

Greatness seems alarmed, but she nods. "Well, do walk in, Mr. Butler, if you can walk yourself." She eyes Starflight, the supposed Ashley Wilkes, with distaste. Or perhaps she didn't like his intoxicated noises. Either way, she's very good.

"We're supposed to sing? Um...AW AW AW AW AHHH~ singing noises~." Everyone laughs again as Ms. Kestrel hides her head in her hands. "MELANIE! Let's put Sta- Ashley down on the sofa. OOF."

Starflight falls on the ground as Tsunami gently pushes him. His pained expression turns into an annoyed one. "What the heck was that for?"

"Guys, be quiet!" Sunny yells next to me, but nobody listens. Everyone's so crazy and loud and weird.

In the midst of the chaos, I find myself saying, "Maybe we should do the part where Melanie and Belle are talking."

That is one of my favorite parts of the book- Melanie offering a hand to Belle, someone with a ruined reputation. Scarlett views her as a barbaric woman alongside everyone else, but Melanie refuses to see in the same viewpoint, accepting Belle's help and stating that she is a very kind woman.

"What did you say?"

Somehow I have spoken too loud and everyone's staring at me. The loud screams have quieted down, and even Sunny's staring at me with a surprised expression. The drama teacher is also watching me, and I can see her thoughts more clearly than anyone else's- *leukemia*. I can taste it, the look in her eyes, the hostility.

I gulp. "I- I said we should do the part where Melanie and Belle are talking. Melanie helps Belle, and they become friends. It shows how kind Melanie is. I thought it would be a good way to see who really can act Melanie well, because that's the thing the character evolves around- kindness."

Mrs. Kestrel's are so glowering that it almost makes me tremble. "What the hell do you know about acting? You wanna take charge?"

"No, ma'am." Here we go. "Sorry."

"Well, we might as well do it. What will everyone say when we didn't hear the girl with cancer?" Kestrel is spitting every word, piercing my chest with each. "But don't expect us to do what you say next time. Spoiled brat."

Silence.

"Who does she think she is?" I look in the direction of the voice and find Scarlet Sky, her arms linked with Peril.

My heart is thumping loudly. I don't know what to say, and my hands are trembling. I know her words aren't true, that she's just being bitter for some unknown reason that probably isn't my fault, but it hurts. My eyesight is blinded by tears and I dig my fingernails into my palm to stop it. I cannot cry in front of this woman.

Sunny gives her a scared look, but opens her mouth before I can

stop her. "I- Mrs. Kestrel, Glory was just-"

"You keep quiet, or I swear I will call your mom, I don't care if she's famous. Think you can do anything, don't you, because you're so rich?" Ms. Kestrel whips back to me.

Starflight's voice. His eyes look at mine, and I'm actually surprised because his eyes contain so much anger. "Ms. Kestrel, Glory was only saying her opinion out loud. You say she's taking charge when she only did her role as a person of the drama club. In fact, you're actually discriminating her of her- her-"

*Disability? Cancer?* Kestrel seems surprised when Starflight speaks up, because it's clear that he doesn't speak much, except to his very close friends. I didn't know he cared so much about me. He actually looked furious. Or perhaps it's just a Cancer Perk. She opens her mouth to say something, but a girl with red hair walks up the stage without a word. It's clear that she has the role of Belle.

"Alright, turn to the page where Melanie talks to Belle. Tsunami, Starflight, you idiots, come down and let them do the audition."

Tsunami comes down with a sheepish smile. She quickly comes to us. "Sorry, Kestrel tends to raise her voice for no reason. I'm thinking of telling the principal what happened today so that she finally gets fired or something." Rolling her eyes, she wraps her arms around our shoulders. "So. I was thinking about dying my hair blue Saturday. Anybody wanna come?"

"Sure." Sunny gives me a smile, her eyes searching mine. Then she looks away, holding her hands tightly together. "Won't your mom be mad?"

Tsunami shrugs. "That's the whole point. She's ALWAYS talking about formality and dresses and neat hair. Glory, did you know that the entire reason I had to quit the swimming team and end up here was because MY MOM THINKS THAT SWIMMING IS UNLADYLIKE? SEXIST MUCH? I thought I would have to give up the captain place to FREAKING WHIRLPOOL, but Riptide came and everything turned out alright."

"So, it's your sign of rebellion?" Starflight awkwardly comes up to us. "Blue hair?"

"YES." Tsunami starts headbanging, which makes everyone laugh. "REBELLIONNN!"

Sunny laughs and comes to my side, lowering her voice. "Glory, who did you try out for? Scarlett? I saw you on the stage, but I was too busy helping Ms. Kestrel."

"Are you kidding?" We slowly creep away from Tsunami, who is still headbanging. A small crowd has formed around her. "It's pretty obvious Tsunami's getting the role. I mean, look at her. She's the captain, anyway. I tried out for Melanie, but Greatness will probably get it. She's really good." I can't help but look at her again-- she's so calm and beautiful. Someone I wanted to be. Someone, I can't help but think, that Deathbringer wants. "I messed up my audition anyway. I couldn't even say anything."

"I'm sure you didn't! Everyone was looking at you. You should have gone for Scarlett. It suits you much better." Sunny shrugs. "Honestly, though, I will be content being one of the sisters or something."

"Same." She says it like she genuinely means it. I, on the other hand, can't help but wish for a bigger role. Maybe it's my mom's genes in me, screaming at me to act. I have seen a couple of her shows. She shines the brightest when she acts, with that twinkling blue eyes. I, on the other hand, can't even say a few lines in front of a crowd without stuttering. But I can't help but believe in the power of genes of a Hollywood star.

Sadly, at the end of the day, her genes are not enough to get me the role. Greatness Night gets it, and I can't do anything but clap along.

# [8] I Wish

[image] [image]

☆Glory☆

*If you were in love with someone that never loved you back, what would you do? Is there a way you can end it?*

*-Daffodil*

I'm not the type to write stuff in my school blog, but I'm desperate for answers and I guess I don't know any other websites. Grandmother is too strict with social media and I don't have any other friends to ask these kinds of private questions to except the one that I am loving hopelessly.

I think of my new drama friends- Tsunami, Sunny, Starflight, and Clay- but I don't think they would be okay with someone they just met few days ago asking questions like those. Anyone could guess who I was talking about, anyway, if I didn't ask them anonymously.

I clench my eyes shut and click enter. I sit on my desk staring at the screen for a while, but nobody answers. Figures. Nobody ever looks at the school website, especially at weekends.

I head downstairs to give Grandmother her usual cup of tea. I say hi to our housekeeper, Mrs. Secretkeeper, and to her daughter Moon. They have lived with us for a few months. *Maybe I should have talked to Moon,* I think, but she's only in elementary school and I dismiss it. Although she *does* have two boys her age running after her. Sometimes I wonder how she does it. Maybe I should, later.

"Would you like a cup of tea, Moon?" I pick lavender tea and she shakes her head. She looks at me with big eyes- they always remind me of Deathbringer's- and place her hands out towards me.

"Cookies are bad for your health, Moon, you shouldnt eat over three a day," I say loudly as I hand her a double chocolate chip cookie. I

lower my voice. "Eat it all before you go into your room. I'm dead if your mother finds out. Got it?"

She gives me a huge, mischievous smile and gives me a thumbs-up. "You're so strict, Glory," she says loudly when Secretkeeper yells at Moon to come help her fold laundry. "In a minute, Mom, I have to use the restroom!" She hugs me and runs to her room.

Moon's big, mischievous smile reminds me of Deathbringer, and I look at my phone for a reply. Still no luck. I put my earbuds on and look at Grandmother's collection of cups.

*Baby, I don't feel so good, six words you never understood*
*I'll never let you go, five words you'll never say*

I pick the pink one with the red flowers. That's when I realize how sad my weekends are without him- he used to come over all the time. And now, after going out with Greatness, his visits have become rare. Perhaps that's the general rule, that you don't visit a girl's house on your own when you have a girlfriend. I wouldn't know. *Maybe I should ask Moon?*

I would like to ask her a lot of things, but the fact a fourth grader knows more about dating than me is a little depressing. Stupid pride and stupid Deathbringer.

*I laugh along like nothing's wrong, four days has never felt so long*
*If three's a crowd and two was us, one slipped away*

Maybe that's unfair. He never saw me as more than a friend- and that probably hurts more than anything. The fact I can't do much without him is mostly my fault, not his. Maybe I should have never let him talk to me that time at school. Maybe I should have been that one girl that didn't have friends- loneliness would have been better than this.

*I just wanna make you feel okay*
*But all you do is look the other way*
*I can't tell you how much I wish I didn't wanna stay*
*I just kinda wish you were gay*

This hurts too badly. It's jealousy mixed with anger and regret. It flames everytime I see him with Greatness, and some part of me hates him. Other part of me hates her, and at the same time envies her. I imagine myself in that position- his eyes on me, his fingers entwined with mine, his smile for me to enjoy. Not as Glory the Friend but as Greatness the Lover. And then they all crumble to pieces as I remind myself to don't give away anything, to look away, hating myself for the jealousy.

*Is there a reason we're not through?*
*Is there a 12-step just for you?*
*Our conversation's all in blue*
*11 "heys" (Hey, hey, hey, hey)*
*Ten fingers tearin' out my hair*
*Nine times, you never made it there*
*I ate alone at seven, you were six minutes away*

I thought ot might fade away after a while, but it never does. It just gets bigger and bigger, engulfing me, tearing me to pieces.

Maybe I should date someone. But nobody wants to date a girl like me and I don't want to date anyone unlike him.

*How am I supposed to make you feel okay*
*When all you do is walk the other way?*
*I can't tell you how much I wish I didn't wanna stay*
*I just kinda wish you were gay*

There was this one time in seventh grade when Deathbringer and I were playing in my room. We were looking up ways to make chocolate, and he was lying on my bed. I was showing him a picture on my phone, laughing at a joke he had made, when I tripped and landed right on him- our faces were inches off each other's. I really thought we would kiss, and I couldn't think of anything other than his big, dark eyes when he pushed me off and laughed at my clumsiness. Our entire relationship was like that- I was the one overthinking, and he was the one brushing me off.

*To spare my pride*
*To give your lack of interest, an explanation*
*Don't say I'm not your type*

*Just say that I'm not your preferred sexual orientation*

I walk towards Grandmother's room with the tea. Because my grandmother is the only friend other than Deathbringer. A friend that scolds me to sit straighter. Very fun.

*I'm so selfish*
*But you make me feel helpless, yeah*
*And I can't stand another day*
*Stand another day*

I miss Deathbringer. And I hate myself for it. Damn it, I hate him too. And love him at the same time. That's the damn problem.

*I just wanna make you feel okay*
*But all you do is look the other way, hmm*
*I can't tell you how much I wish I didn't wanna stay*
*I just kinda wish you were gay*
*I just kinda wish you were gay*
*I just kinda wish you were gay*

I get rid of the earbuds and stuff them in my pocket, setting the tea on the table. I look into the mirror and brush my hair with my fingers. Grandmother would scold me on everything- my hair, my clothes, my sitting position. It was just her everyday attitude, expectations of everything in her house to be perfect.

Grandmother never got angry about anything, though. She never raised her voice.

"YOU TOLD ME YOURSELF THAT YOU DIDN'T WANT TO SEE HER AGAIN!"

Oop. Grandmother is angry.

"MOTHER? IS THAT WHAT YOU CALL YOURSELF? A FINE MOTHER YOU ARE, YOU ABANDONED YOUR DAUGHTER JUST BECAUSE OF A DISEASE SHE COULD NOT CONTROL!" Her voice is raising more and more, to the point it cracks at *control*. "You do not deserve to see Glory, do you hear me? Never call this number again, or I will call the police. Don't even think about coming to our

house, I'll make sure to spread the rumors you are so worried about. That's what you always care about, isn't it, more than your family?"

Mother. I see her more than I would like to- on TV, on magazines, on movie posters and YouTube videos. Her married life, her husband, her son. A happy family.

I head down the stairs. I don't know what to think. *She wants to meet me again. She wants to see me.*

I guess I always knew why she left- I knew I was an accident she made with a man, but the fact she left because I had cancer is new. Thinking back, she always was around before I was diagnosed. I guessed it, but it's another thing to think something and being told I'm right. I guess if I was a star, I might not want an accident child either, especially with cancer.

It's been so long since I saw her, and I don't know what to feel. I don't feel any particular sadness. I just hope I don't have to see her, that Grandmother will keep her away forever. I don't want her to apologize or ask me for forgiveness. I just don't see her as anything- she has no part in my life, and I hope she wouldn't expect one.

That's when my phone rings, and I walk into my room and turn on the computer. Finally, a reply. It seems so childish- like a reply someone will give me would ever make a difference. But I'm so lonely and so friendless that I click on the school website.

*Dear Daffodil,*

*Just give it time- it never faded away for me, but it gets easier to manage. I recommend making yourself busy with something. I wouldn't recommend dating someone else, because I have tried it and it doesn't work . In the end, it only hurts that person .*

*In the worst case, just confess. If you get rejected, it might get easier to get over. Just make sure you do the right thing for yourself . You should always come first.*

*-Helianthus*

# [9] Bravery

[image]

☆Glory☆

*Daffodils symbolize new beginnings and hope.*

Apparently, my mother is good at doing things that people don't want her to do. I am also good at that. Perhaps I got it from her.

"Who are you meeting?" Moon's fingers are magical-- they somehow manage to make my messy blonde hair into a beautiful side-braid. "You're looking nice today."

I tug at the red dress. "Somebody important. You know, my mother? The one that's on business trips all the time? She's going to come and see me."

Moon studies me with a weird expression. Her jade-green eyes are so beautiful, but it's suddenly filled with sadness. I wonder if she knows, if Grandmother told her. I'm not sure how I would feel if she did-- our family business has never been a subject of discussion, even between Grandmother and me. Always silence, always treated as something shameful. "When was the last time you saw her?"

"A couple of years ago." I stand up and stare at the mirror-- I look strange. I might even look similar to the woman on TV, the woman in magazines. Except I don't have her stunning blue eyes and I have no idea how to smile so big. Maybe it's a part of being so famous-- you have to be happy all the time.

"The red necklace will probably go well with that." Moon gently pulls out a necklace from one of the drawers. I didn't even know it was there. "Why do you look so surprised?"

"You're so good at this stuff." Of course, a middle school girl has a better fashion sense than me. But then, it's Moon. She's good at everything. "We are going to eat together, aren't we? You should

dress up, too."

"We aren't." She gives me a handful of daffodils. They're tied together with a ribbon. "I'm going to eat in the kitchen with Mom after I help her set up the table."

Okay, so Secretkeeper is not eating with us. That's just great. More awkwardness. I've always felt both of them as family, so I didn't guess that we were going to eat separately. A Hollywood woman probably wouldn't like for two workers to eat with her. Figures.

I don't know what to say, so I look at the daffodils in my hands. They remind me of the advice I got from Rose-- *In the worst case, just confess. If you get rejected, it might get easier to get over. Just make sure you do the right thing for yourself. You should always come first.*

But then-- there's a love expert right beside me. I wonder why I didn't ask her before. Moon's going over the jewelry box to look for matching earrings. "Moon, what would you do if someone you like likes someone else?"

"Why, do you like Deathbringer?"

I manage to choke on nothingness and cough for thirty seconds. "NO." Was it that obvious? But then, I don't know any other boys other than Deathbringer. "It's someone from my drama class. His name is--" I can't think of anyone. "Starflight." Yep, let me ruin everything because somehow he's the first person that comes into mind. "How do you even know about Deathbringer?"

Moon raises her eyebrows with a huge grin on her face. "Starflight? Who's that? I only know the Deathbringer guy from your class because Mrs. Bright talks about him." Moon shrugs. "She even showed me his yearbook pictures."

"He has a girlfriend. But the guy I have a crush on doesn't." I don't even know. All I can do is apologize a million times to Starflight in my head. "Can you answer my question, though?"

"If Starflight doesn't have a girlfriend, how do you know he doesn't like you?"

That makes me think back-- does Starflight like someone? I mean, he defended me at the play. But then, maybe he has a great sense of right and wrong. I don't even know why I'm thinking about him all of a sudden.

"I don't know. He probably likes someone else." I'm blushing badly, so I change the subject. Moon and her jade-green eyes. They look right through me. "Nevermind. Let's talk about you instead. Did you choose yet?"

"Did I choose who?"

"The two boys that just drool over you. Winter and-- who was it? Qibli?"

"Oh, yeah. I turned Winter down about six months ago and now I'm--"

"DATING QIBLI?" I turn to her, unable to hide a huge grin from my face. "YESSSS! MOONBLI WON!!! Wait, let me go tell your mom that I won the bet."

"GLORY!" She's smiling, too. "Did you seriously have a bet on who I will date? AND with MOM?"

"YASSSS!!" I am dancing around the room, but Moon grabs a hold of my hand before I reach for the door.

"I'M NOT DATING QIBLI!" Moon jokingly punches my arm. "I turned down Winter about six months ago and Qibli three months ago! They told me the day before yesterday that THEY were dating. Happy now? Don't tell anyone, though, it's supposed to be a secret."

Well. Stupid elementary kids stupidly dating each other. That's cute. "Qibli and Winter. Wibli?"

Moon grins mischievously, and I wonder what's going around that little kid's head. I thought she was one of the princess girls that had boys all over her. I guess I was wrong-- she was a queen matchmaker. "Qinter. Duh."

☆

"Just say what you want to and leave in ten seconds," Grandmother's voice can be heard from the door. She's blocking the door the best she can.

A voice. Strangely familiar. It's not exactly the voice what I hear on movies and TV shows. Although Grandmother hates to see her daughter's movies, I sometimes watch it on my desktop.

Sleek brown hair. That's unfamiliar. The voice is rising enough for me to hear. "Let me in. Somebody's following me."

Grandmother moves after a few moments, letting her in. The woman takes her head off, and her brown wig falls out, revealing a golden one. Her blue eyes are searching the house, and they finally find me. I don't know what to do. I kind of want to run.

But, in a way, I'm tired of running. I always ran after her, and she, in turn, always ran away from me. And now she's coming on her own, walking to me, placing her feet in my circle. And maybe I don't want to run anymore. Not after her, or even from her.

I want to stay. I want to be brave.

She looks at me, and I look at her. I can remember the car going away, the tears falling to the ground. She probably saw me then in the car, the little girl running after her mom. But she didn't stop.

I hand her the flowers. She takes them wordlessly, and her mouth is mouthing something, but nothing comes out. Her other hand is reaching for my arm, but I flinch. And her eyes are filling with tears, but she doesn't let them fall.

I don't know what to say. My heart's beating too hard. "The flowers symbolize- new beginnings."

Then a tall boy, a few years older, comes into the house. He's formally dressed, and he's laughing and hugging with Grandmother. And then another man comes in, and Grandmother stares at him with disbelief.

The daffodils fall to the ground.

# [10] Last Time

[image]

☆Glory☆

*"Glory, your mother wants to meet you. I know you might not want to, and I was furious with her ." Grandmother's eyes are soft. They usually are, when they look at me. That's the best thing about her . "I thought that maybe we can introduce you to her and Jambu, your half-brother . Only if you want to, of course. I would want the best for you."*

*I want to.*

*Maybe it's more than curiosity. Maybe we both have something missing in our lives . Although Grandmother switches the TV off when my mother- Andromeda- comes on, she can't bear to throw the picture in her bedroom away.*

*And, in turn, I sometimes look at myself in the bathroom mirror , brushing my blonde hair. Because, after all, it's the only thing I have from her.*

*"I would love to."*

*I take her wrinkled hand in mine. Because even the famous Grandeur Bright has wrinkled hands. Because even she has her weak moments. But the eyes that look into mine aren't weak at all- they are beautiful. We're both taking our hearts out one last time- we're giving them a chance. We're giving us a chance.*

*New beginnings and hope . It's what we need.*

☆

*Slap.*

"I told you to never bring him here."

A red cheek. The sound seems to echo all around the room, and I

can see Secretkeeper and Moon at the door with the steak, looking shocked.

"I was stupid to think that a girl like you would have changed." Grandmother walks until she is blocking her from me. Her voice is unbelievably cold. "We made a deal for you to come alone. Of course you didn't respect the things I laid out for you, because you're ALWAYS TRYING TO DO THINGS ON YOUR OWN WAY-"

"Well, you haven't changed a bit either, Mother." Her face crumples as she reaches out to touch her reddened cheek. "I came here to see my daughter. Is that so wrong to you? You always manage to make everything about me wrong, don't you?"

Grandmother raises her hand again, and I have to hold her back. She looks surprised, but she slowly lowers her hand. "I thought that you finally came to your senses. That you actually wanted to see your daughter. But here you come with your son, acting like it won't be a surprise to Glory. And maybe that's okay. But your- your *husband*-What about your daughter? Don't you know what she went through without you? You told me that day that you didn't want to take care of her. And why are you coming back?"

I clench my eyes shut. "Grandmother!" It's the first time I ever raised my voice at her.

"A very open welcome, Grandeur." The man's voice is dry. "I knew you disliked me, but I hope you can manage from hitting my wife again." His eyes sweep over her to me, and he doesn't even try to hide his distaste.

Grandmother presses her mouth shut, her eyes narrowed. She looks like she wants to murder this man, but instead she motions for the boy to come to her side. He obediently does.

"Glory, this is Jambu. Your half-brother." Grandmother gives him a weak smile. "He's currently in college."

"Hello. I'm Glory Bright." I saw him in YouYube videos, but actually realizing that he's related to me is bizarre. He doesn't even look like me- he looks like one of the stars. He belongs there. Half-brother.

So not the same father, which probably means that the accident happened during their marrige. I guess I'm something to remind them of it. That explains the frown.

He waves with a grin, pulling at his tie. "I'm starving. I hope you didn't forget that I'm vegetarian, Grandmother."

"Of course not." She's still refusing to see anyone but Jambu. "Anaconda, I thought you would like steak. Is it- alright?"

Anaconda is eyeing the house, her fingers gently on her cheek. She has a slight frown on her face- nobody in the family seems to be happy except Jambu, who happily sits at the table and starts getting himself salad. The others, including me, sit awkwardly.

"So, Glory, I heard that you were in a drama club at your school." Anaconda smiles. "Did you get a role?"

I have imagined many times what it would be like when we talked, my mother and I. More than one of them contained hugging and forgiveness. Sadly, none of them had the words "drama club" in them.

"Yes. We don't know yet." I probably should avoid telling her that the daughter of the famous Anaconda couldn't even get a supporting role in a drama club.

Secretkeeper asks me how I would like my steak, and I tell her well done. The man, Anaconda's husband, gives a smug smile. "Glory, was it? Are you scared of blood? I assure you that steak served medium rare is the best. Try it out."

Grandmother cuts in before I can reply. "She likes her steak well done."

"Why?" He seems excited to call me out. On how I like my steak well done. For God's sake. "Because of the bl-?"

I can't take it anymore. "YES! I like well done steak and must be immediately ridiculed because apparently that means I am scared of blood!"

He blinks rapidly. *Worth it.*

I clear my throat. "Sorry. It's because I have chronic leukemia and bacteria can spread through contact with the raw meat or the liquid of it, causing cross-contamination. That's why I shouldn't take it when I'm going through treatment, even light ones. Are you satisfied?" I set my fork down. "I would like medium rare. I prefer it. But for health reasons, I hope you respect my decision on the choice of how well I like my steak done."

Awkward silence follows.

"I didn't know. I'm sorry. Somebody failed me to notify that you had... leukemia."

Jambu snorts. When his father gives him a glare, he turns it into a small cough. But he gives me a thumbs-up under the table, and I laugh into my handkerchief. Okay, I have to admit I like this guy. His dad? Not so much.

"So, why did you come here, Anaconda?" Grandmother hasn't lifted her fork. "I know you must have had a reason. Don't say it's for Glory, you must have had some other goal. With your *busy* husband, too." She's almost smiling. I wonder if anyone else can see, but her mask is wearing off. It really makes me think that we could do this more- I never realized how curious I was about my mother. And Jambu, too. Perhaps perhaps really can do it, the new beginnings. "But, I was thinking that maybe we could do this more..."

She's avoiding our eyes. "We came here to tell you we're going away. We've decided to go to Europe, and we won't come back. We have decided that we want to be close to Jambu, and I thought you would want to know." She's still not looking at me or Grandmother. "And I was curious to see- how you and Glory was doing."

"You were...curious." Nobody's eating anymore. There's just silence and disbelief. Jambu won't meet my eyes. Anaconda won't meet my eyes. The only one that does is the man, and I hate him more than anything. "*Curious*..."

I slowly stand up from the table. My hands are trembling. I wonder if that woman knows what she's doing to me, to both of us. How she's taking our hearts and just tearing it inro pieces. "May I excuse myself?"

"Glory." Anaconda stands up. "I'm sorry. I just wanted to talk. I know I have no right to, but I wanted to tell you everything, about your father and anything else you wanted to know-"

"Ha! Her father, is that what we're calling now?" That man, he's the one that's ruining it all. "You told me it was an accident. And now you're talking about him like he's your lost loved one."

"Can you- be quiet for a second? Sweetheart, please." Anaconda's reaching out, and Jambu is shaking his head at his father with a disgusted expression on his face.

"And a girl with cancer- is that what you wanted to hide from me? Well, it would make sense, seeing how everyone will react when the girl Anaconda got when she made an 'accident' is a girl with cancer."

She doesn't say anything for a while. When she opens her mouth, nothing comes out. And she just doesn't shine in the room anymore. She's another weak woman trying to cover everything up by running away. In a way, she even reminds me of...me.

"Just say it." I look at her straight in the eye. And then I see the daffodils. Stupid daffodils. New beginnings and hope...none of those things were ever there for me. And now my heart is shattered.

I hate myself. I hate those flowers. So I grab the ones that I can destroy first- I tame the vase in my hands and shatter them on the floor. My eyes are filling up, and I don't want to cry in front of them, and I won't, I can't. I can't even raise my voice. "Just say that you chose your job before me. Just say I don't matter to you, that you wish I was never born, that you want me to die so you can finally be free from everything that's ruining your perfect family."

She doesn't say anything, and that's when I decide that I hate her. "You're just a girl running away from your problems wishing they

didn't exist." Hurtful words. I want to hurt her too, just like she hurt me. I want to tear her heart to pieces, although I know I'm not important enough to her to do such a thing. "I'm so sorry that I can't freaking disappear."

She's hiding her face in her hands, sobbing. *How dare you. How freaking dare you cry in front of me. Like you have ever felt any pain.* "Don't say that. Don't- I-I'm so sorry-"

She should be. She should be very freaking sorry.

"Also, you." I'm pointing at her husband. "Nobody gives a crap that you like medium well steak better than well done."

"Glory!" Even Grandmother's voice can't make me stop. Nothing can make me stop from running away from this.

"Don't go," my mother says as she sobs. When I look back, Jambu is comforting her.

"You're going." My voice is different. "I was ready to start again. I was ready to forgive you and accept you. And now- you're leaving again." My hands are clenching into a fist. Yes, anger. The anger I have suppressed for so long, and now they come bursting out. I don't even feel pity for that woman. "Did you listen to me when I asked you to stay, when I was a little girl?"

"Glory." She's saying my name. Like she has a right to.

*Did you ever look back, even once?*

The question I really want to ask. The question I've always wanted to ask. But the words don't come out, and suddenly I'm storming outside. I don't even cry.

My new beginnings, ruined.

The noises that come out of my mouth are the wailing sounds of an animal. They just come out like they've been waiting for this- choking my neck, making me tremble. They're making me run somewhere. I don't even know where I'm going, and I ignore everyone that tries to ask me if I'm okay.

Maybe I'm going to a place to kill myself. Because nobody wants me alive. Because some people are actually without I disappear before the cancer gets me. And now, I kind of do, too.

I finally reach a place. And I forget everything. All I can think now is how people say that sometimes, your body knows you better than your head does.

I wonder what I look like, a girl in a fancy dress, her eyes red, her mouth letting out sounds lesser than something an animal will make.

I'm at the only place that I can turn to.

I'm at Deathbringer's house.

# [11] Always

[image]

☆Glory☆

Now that I'm here, I don't know what to do.

I apparently have my phone in one of the pockets of the dress. But what am I going to do? What do I *want* to do? Tell him everything that happened?

Yeah. That's exactly it.

But no. I stand at the doorway, too afraid to ring the doorbell.

*He's not like Anaconda,* I tell myself. *He won't look at me like she looked at me. He knows me better, he cares about me.*

*Does he, though?*

I slide to the ground. Suddenly, I'm so timid. Everything that I had without giving a second thought has become scary. All because of Anaconda and her stupid family.

The phone buzzes, and I find ten missed calls from Grandmother. My hands are starting to shake from the cold, and I don't know what to do. Would she be with them? Would they have gone at this point?

I don't really want to know.

Then the phone rings again, flashing the name *Bringer of Death.*

"Hello?" I wonder if he can hear the shake in my voice. I'm suddenly scared again.

"Glory, where are you? Your grandma just called and she said you were missing-"

Shouting. *"Who is it?"*

*"Let me take- why are you-"*

"What's wrong, Glory?"

*"So it's-"* A pause. *"You- going away- I- for you-"*

Should I hang up?

*"I was stupid..."*

Before I can say anything, he hangs up. And I sit there for a few moments, wondering what it was. It's lonely there, sitting on the doormat of your crush's house, stars. It isn't bad, but it's lonely.

When I look at my phone again, he's calling.

"Where are you?" Deathbringer's voice suddenly cuts in. "Your voice is trembling."

*So is yours.* "I can call some other time. It's alright." *It's not alright. I want to talk to you. I'm at your house.* His voice is like magic- tears are dripping from my face. Just talking to him makes me feel better. "I-Is it a bad time to call?"

"No, it's okay now. I'm outside, I'm heading to my house now. Are you at your house?"

"I'm at your doorstep." *I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.* I try blocking my mouth, but I'm sobbing. "I'm sorry...I was planning to go now." I don't know what to do. And the wailing sounds are escaping my mouth, and I hate myself. I absolutely hate myself.

For days I barely talked to him, and now I'm sitting at his doorstep because I don't have anywhere else to turn to. And now just hearing his voice is making me cry. God. The power this boy has over me.

Maybe I love him more than I think. Which is bad.

"Don't go. It's okay. It's alright." I can hear him running. "Okay?"

He must have had a tough night. His voice is trembling, too.

"Okay." I'm leaning on his door. I'm thinking about my mom, my half-brother, the man, and Grandmother. I'm thinking about how selfish I am. I'm thinking of the daffodils on the ground, with the vase. I'm think about the shattered new beginnings.

I'm thinking about how Anaconda is running away from everything. Not meeting my eyes, hiding her face in her hands like I'm something shameful to talk to. Maybe I am. Maybe I really am.

"Okay."

*Maybe "okay" will be our "always".*

"Okay." I close my eyes, listening for his footsteps. Soon, I hear them. He's coming closer. I lower my hand, and I faintly hear him hanging up.

When I open my eyes, he's standing in front for me. I wonder what I look like, with my crazy blonde hair and puffy red eyes. "Hi."

I was expecting him to open the door, but instead he gently comes to his knees, looking into my eyes. "Glory, you're going to get an infection. You need to go inside."

Me and my stupid leukemia. I am trembling, but it's like I'm planted there. "Just-for a moment. Please"

I can't see his expression, but when he wraps his arms around me, I just kind of break into a horrible sob.

I know it's stupid, but I'm so scared that he will somehow leave me so I keep hugging him tighter, touching his back to make sure he's there.

And he is.

It's crying, but it's a different kind of crying. Necause it's warm, because his hug means everything that my mother didn't give to me. Words spill from my mouth, mixing with my tears, mixing with the warmth of Deathbringer's arms. And he listens.

The best thing is, it's not a lonely sob, it's a sob that comes when you are in someone's arms.

And that's the best kind of crying.

Because he's has been there, and he is there. Because he will be there.

*Always.*

☆

Deathbringer has a habit of becoming a chocolate maniac when he is sad.

This, apparently, is one of those times. He stuffs his face with chocolate ice cream while gobbling down double chocolate-chip cookies, his eyes glaring at the Gone with the Wind movie.

"Are you okay?" I hand him a cup of milk as I set my own cup of green tea at the floor. "You look kind of- angry."

"Greatness broke up with me." He won't look at anything but the screen. My heart kind of stops, and I don't know what I feel. It isn't happiness, that's for sure. Not at all.

"Why?" I hate it. I hate the tortured look on his face, I hate the regret that fills his eyes. I hate it more than the jealousy. "Why did she break up with you?"

"For a lot of reasons. Mostly because of me. I wasn't good enough for her. I wish I was."

I don't think I have ever realized how lonely Deathbringer looks sometimes. Behind all that charmingness and smiles, he's just a boy. I wonder if he's letting me see it, or if I knew him long enough to know myself.

In my dark side, I want them to break up. I have to admit I do. But his happiness is more important than my longings. And he seems happy with her, he really does. "Call her. Tell her you'll do better." *Don't make the same mistake my mother did.* "Don't let her go."

His face is emotionless. "I do want to. I really do. But all I do is hurt her. I can't do better." He takes a sip of his milk. "It's not like I don't love her. But I know I can't do better, it's just who I am. But more than anything, I know I don't deserve her. That's why I wanted to leave her before. Not because she isn't enough, but because I am. I really want to run away until she forgets me. Because that's probably better for her, too. It was guilt."

"Do you have other things on your mind?" I'm thinking of Anaconda- my mother- more than anything else. She prioritized her acting life, her own family, more than me. Maybe that's the case with Deathbringer.

He reaches out and touches my messy braid. "Can I do something with your hair?"

"Sure." Anaconda and Deathbringer. The person I hate the most, and the person at the top of my favorites list. Maybe they aren't too different.

He gently brushes my hair with his long, thin fingers, braiding it and brushing it loose again. We used to do it a lot when we were younger- when Deathbringer came to my house with his bruises, when I had to go to the hospital because I was bleeding too much. He would always be there, brushing my hair. That's one of the reasons I kept it long.

As I watch the screen- it comes to a scene where Rhett is leaving Scarlett. She's confessing his love for him and everything, begging him to stay, and he's so tired of everything. It's clear he doesn't love her anymore, he's too tired to feel anything. The famous line comes on- *"Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn"*- and I feel something wet dropping on my hair.

It's a rough day for the both of us.

I know he doesn't like it when I see him cry, so I just watch the movie like nothing's wrong. And the teardrops keep falling, and I keep watching. I don't turn around even when the movie ends and the music comes on, listing the names of the actors.

All I can do is stay there, like he has done for me. Letting him brush my hair, trying to give him comfort, even if it's small. Acting like the sobbing in the bathroom is covered by the noise of running water.

Which kind of makes me wonder how many lonely nights he spends in bed crying himself to sleep without telling anyone.

Smiling at him when he comes out of the bathroom, his eyes slightly red. Hugging him when I go out of the house. Calling him the way home.

It's all I can do. Because maybe he isn't ready to share his pain with me like I have shared with him all these years. Maybe because he's so used to being the wall that he doesn't know how to lean on somebody else. Because he might want to act like he's perfect for a little longer.

But I will wait. I'll go to him when he's ready. I'll wrap my arms around him and tell him that it's okay to feel pain. That it's alright. And maybe one day he'll realize how it feels good, to cry with someone by your side. To let go of his loneliness.

Always.

# [12] Change

[image]

☆Glory☆

*Dear Helianthus,*

*I can't stop thinking about him.*

*I don't ever want to break our friendship, but I'm afraid that he will be involved in another relationship if I don't confess. It's a constant struggle. But then, there's the most important question: what if he doesn't like me?*

*I don't think he sees me as someone that's more than a friend. And I'm afraid to ruin everything .*

*It's like there's an invisible line of friendship that I just can't cross because of fear.*

*Do you have any experience on that?*

*-Daffodil*

☆

A lot of things change after the meeting with Anaconda.

I get pneumonia after staying outside, and I spend days in the hospital. It's Grandmother doesn't get any sleep nowadays, but when I wake up in the hospital her with her warm hand on mine, I know we're pull it through together.

After I come from the hospital, I find that the pictures in Grandmother's bedroom were shattered and removed.

I stop looking up her name on Google, and I'm the one, not Grandmother, to turn the TV off when her commercials come on.

Apparently, they all left kind of sheepishly after I stormed out. At

least, according to Jambu, who actually now visits our house twice on weekends.

There are many bad things and a few good things that come after the Incident. The best good thing is Jambu.

Jambu, who is a vegetarian. Jambu, who apparently doesn't want to go to Europe or get a college education there. Jambu, who I thought was a haughty Hollywood kid that turned out to be a normal, laid-back college boy who likes shooting darts to annoy Grandmother.

Sometimes, I even shoot them with him.

Another good thing is Deathbringer and the rest of the Gone with the Wind geeks. After going to the salon to dye Tsunami's hair (Jambu drove me there and ended up dying his own hair pink) together, he later naturally joins our lunch table.

I'm too scared to ask him about Greatness, and all I can see is that they avoid each other in the hallway. They don't even talk.

That seems to be the case with everyone- once lovers, there's no way of becoming friends again.

Maybe that's why I've been scared of confessing. To ruin the things we actually have. To someday see him look at me with the expression he looks at other girls.

A lot of people ask me what my secret is, the secret for staying next to Deathbringer all that time when so many girls have tried to. They look at me, awestruck that I haven't fallen into what they call Death Magic.

Yeah, no.

The only difference between the girls Deathbringer has dated and me is that they are brave enough to tell him their feelings. I am not. They are strong enough to risk their feelings, and I just can't live without him.

Maybe I'm too scared. Maybe I love him too much.

☆

"What kind of girls do guys like?" Tsunami's looking at Deathringer with an urgent expression. "No, before that, what do you think of my blue hair?"

Deathbringer looks bored. There seems to be a certain role to the people of the lunch table- Tsunami's loud and funny. Clay is kind and big and likes to eat. Starflight can surprisingly torture people with unsurprising Shakespeare. Sunny is warm and kind. They tell me I'm sarcastic and moody, which I guess is true.

Deathbringer's new role is matchmaker.

"I mean, I don't know who this guy is. How did you meet him and how would you describe him?"

"Sunny, tell him how hot Riptide is."

"Huh?" Sunny scratches her head, but she's clearly taken back. Her blonde hair is softly tied into a ponytail, and it sways as she tilts her head. "I- I guess he looks nice."

"Nice isn't the right word." Tsunami's frowning as she chomps on the fish burger. "He like- shines all the time. He even has sparkling teeth. He's just really charming and my mom hates him. I can't really tell what kind of girls he likes, though. Maybe outgoing. He's kind of quiet, so I'll probably have to make the move."

"Outgoing." My mouth's tilting up. "That's easy. Go to him and like, SMOOCH SMOOCH KISS ME LET'S HAVE BABIES BECAUSE I LOVE YOUR SPARKLING TEETH AND I ALSO KIND OF WISH YOUR NOSE WAS A HERRING SO I CAN EAT IT-"

"Yeah, cannibalism will totally make him into me." She throws her ketchup at me, which Deathbringer catches and naturally eats it with his french fries. "Starflight, Clay, SAY SOMETHING. HELP YOUR FRIEND."

Starflight looks up from his book. "Make him think you're smart. Although it won't go long because you aren't." *Smack.*

"Pickup lines," Deathbringer says. "Did you fart while swimming? Because you blew me away."

"So you're into that kind of stuff." Tsunami's face wrinkles, and it's actually so funny that Sunny chokes on her water. Deathbringer fake-cries while hiding his face with his hands. I wonder why he isn't in drama club when he's such a drama queen. He would excell at it.

"Chocolate. Give him food. Get a Ring Pop and propose right there." Clay is simply lovable. That's a fact right there.

"Nevermind Riptide for a second. Clay, you obviously lack dating experiences, and so does someone else." Tsunami's eyes are coming towards me. Oh, God. Only if she knew.

Starflight's eyes start to narrow.

"Peril likes Clay."

That simple sentence creates chaos. "Peril? Drama club Peril? Gone with the Wind Peril? Belle Watling Peril? RED HAIR PERIL???"

"CRAZY PERIL LIKES CLAY?" Tsunami's blue eyes widen. "OH GOD. SO YOU'RE TELLING ME I ACTUALLY ANNOYED CLAY'S FUTURE WIFE WITH MY HEADBANGING??

Clay's the most surprised of them all. "WHAT?"

"How did you know?" Deathbringer's sneakily eating Tsunami's french fries as she stands up to look for Peril.

He isn't looking at me, and his face is so unreadable that I'm thrown off guard. I usually can, but this one is something I haven't seen before.

His eyes are dark and attractive. They stand out, like they always do. Everything about him does, although whether he knows it or not is a totally different question. "I had a crush on her, before Greatness."

Of course he did.

I wonder if he knows how much his words mean to me. I think about it a lot, what my words might mean to him. Probably not much. Which makes me wonder if he ever thinks about it, how much effect his words have on people. Because sometimes, the words he throws so carelessly can make a person's day. Or, sometimes, destroy their good mood completely.

*Careful, Glory.* His face tilts upward and he's staring into my eyes.

I blurt out the first thing that comes into mind. "I like you-"

In that millisecond, a lot of things pass through my mind. *Do I want to confess right now, in this very loud lunchroom, right after he told me he liked Peril? No.*

*Do I want him to know my feelings? No .*

*Do I want to see if he gets jealous? ...Yes.*

"-r cousin Starlight." My heart's suddenly beating fast. *Did I just say that? Of course I did.* "Yeah. Him."

Thankfully, the lunchroom is too loud for anyone to hear. I quickly look at Starflight, but he's focused on his book. Thank God.

Deathbringer clearly seems surprised. "What?" He's looking at him, and then me, and then him again. "*What*?"

It's actually so stupid that I'm starting to blush. "God. Just forget it. That just- came out."

He slowly covers his mouth, and one look at each other is all that takes before we both burst out laughing.

High school is just a freaking drama on its own. It's even a bigger drama queen than Deathbringer is.

# [13] Friends

[image]

☆Glory☆

*<Gone with the Wind> List*

*Scarlett O'Hara: Tsunami*

*Melanie Hamilton: Greatness*

*Ashley Wilkes: Starflight*

*Frank Kennedy: Clay*

*Belle Watling: Peril*

*Ellen O'Hara: Sunny*

*O'Hara sister 1: Glory*
*...*

*Please come to the drama room after school to get your script. The play will take place in May.*

☆

"Guess who got the number of the handsomest, cutest, nicest boy in the world?" Tsunami whispers at me and Deathbringer as we head out of the drama room. "MEEEEEEEEE!"

"I wasn't aware you had my phone number." Deathbringer comments, and Tsunami and I kind of gag at the same time. "What?"

"Well, he asked me if I could eat lunch with him at Saturday. Sunny, you heard that, right? Now that I think about it, Sunny should get a boyfriend too! And Starflight! And Glory! I wanna play matchmakerrrrr!" She starts laughing maniacally as Starflight comes

out of the room with Clay.

"Sunny, what do you think of Starflight?" She wiggles her eyebrows at her.

Thank God. Starflight must like Sunny. I kind of see it, the look in his eyes as he stares at Sunny's blonde hair. Then I realize that Deathbringer's watching me, so I cover up my relief with a sad expression.

"We're like, really good friends. Obviously." Sunny smiles, showing off her braces.

"Like, more than friends."

Sunny stubbornly holds onto the meaning of "friend". "Best friends?"

I wonder if Sunny's doing that because she actually doesn't know, or because she doesn't want to get into that whole "friends to lovers" area. Talking about Sunny, it can be either. "MORE, Sunny!"

"MEGA BEST FRIENDS!" Yup, she's definitely acting.

Tsunami signs, patting Sunny's head. "Like. You. Starflight. Boyfriend and girlfriend."

"No." Her face crumples, which kind of makes me surprised. Her face is pure panic and discomfort. "Just- don't try to match me with anyone else. Let's not do that. I'll find someone later. My friendship with Starflight is perfectly good as a friendship. It's not like- relationships are always better. Friendships are underappreciated."

That hits hard.

"Oh. Sorry." *That's surprising. New fact: Sunny can get angry.* "Suny, I'm really sorry, I won't do it again. Are you mad?"

"No." Sunny forcibly smiles. "It's alright."

Awkward silence follows, and Tsunami tries to keep up the conversation. "Guys, would any of you guys want to practice for the play at my house?" Tsunami's still staring at Sunny apologetically.

"Since we're mostly in the drama club. Deathbringer, what club are you in?"

"Boxing." Deathbringer's voice is lifeless for a moment. But then, he reaches and pushes his hair back. "The play sounds fun, though. Can I come? I wanna play Rhett."

"Remember when we had plays at our house?" Deathbringer's eyes meet mine, and we immediately smile.

"You should have tried out for Scarlett. Who got her?"

"The one behind you." Tsunami places a hand on her neck and squeezes, which makes him kind of give out a little scream. "But honestly, I probably only got it because of my mom. I freaking suck at acting, but Kestrel's in love with Mrs. Coral, isn't she? She wrote a lot of scripts for famous movies. Wish I can quit and freaking go to swimming again."

"Can't you?" Coral. I have heard of that name. "Wait, your mom wrote *The SeaWings?*"

"Yeah, she did. She won't let me do ANYTHING. I've been sleeping at Sunny's house because she would have gone absolutely crazy if she knew I had dyed my hair. She thinks swimming is unladylike and thinks I LOVE ACTING. I DON'T."

"Well, it clearly shows. I can tell your acting sucks." Deathbringer puts his tongue out.

Tsunami starts putting her arm around Deathbringer and jokingly choking him. "Now you have brought death to yourself." Deathbringer acting like the victim when he can clearly just twist out of there makes it even funnier.

Until Greatness goes between me and him, giving them a strange look. She quickly looks away, and Tsunami releases him awkwardly.

Deathbringer flirts with everyone, whether he knows it or not. He plays with everyone, makes everyone laugh, and steals people's hearts and break them. That bastard.

Tsunami looks at him and her. I can see her palen, and she calls out after Greatness, her voice really loud. "OH GOD DID I TELL YOU GUYS ABOUT THE GUY I HAVE A CRUSH ON?? IN THE SWIMMING CLUB?"

Greatness doesn't even react. "I thought Riptide was supposed to be a secret," Sunny whispers.

"I mean, better than Greatness Melanie Hamilton glowering at me because I'm choking her boyfriend Death Guy."

Greatness. She really is an exception. I remember his tears when he broke up with her. At least he loved her. I think. Although the rest of his girlfriends, they're entirely a different question. I lower my voice, leaning towards him so only he can hear. "Did you talk to her?"

Deathbringer jerks his head. Then he says loudly, "We broke up."

Silence.

"Oh." Tsunami scratches her head. "So...what were we talking about before all this drama?"

"Um. Your mom, I think? I was gonna say, yeah, Tsunami's mom is scary." Clay shudders. "And her aunt?"

"Her aunt Blister?" Starflight shudders with him. "Did I tell you that she talked to me the last time I was invited to your family dinner, Tsunami? She's- special, that's for sure."

Tsunami sighs with relief, probably because we aren't talking about Deathbringer's complicated love life anymore. "My mom probably will turn into a maniac the moment I tell her about Riptide."

God, she sounds even stricter than Grandmother. "That sounds tough."

"That's why I'll have to act smart. I'll trick her." Tsunami's grin is so mischievous, I actually have to grin back. "And you'll have to help me."

☆

Tsunami's "brilliant plan" is to eat lunch with Riptide and have play practice at my house together afterwards.

It's the first time friends come over to my house, excluding Deathbringer. It's the first time I see the famous Riptide. I lead them to my room, and Tsunami suddenly starts practicing, which leads to Deathbringer suddenly starts laughing saying her acting sucks. Which earns him a smack on the forehead.

After thirty minutes, he becomes her personal acting teacher.

"Rhett. I love Rhett."

"You actually sound freaking lifeless." Deathbringer clicks his tongue, which makes him look even more like a drama queen. We're in my house, sipping tea and practicing our lines with Grandmother creepily watching us from the window. There's even Riptide, and I can tell where Tsunami got the blue hair idea from- his hair is blue, too. "Like, what the actual heck."

"Well, I'm freaking sorry I have zero talent in acting." Tsunami's rolling her eyes. Like that will distract everyone from her hand, which reaches for Riptide's. He blushes, and I admit his blue eyes are pretty nice to look at. I can kind of see why Tsunami's so crazy about him.

Deathbringer frowns at her. "Try again."

"Rhett! I love Rhett. I have always loved him. I just haven't realized it- this is just...really cheesy. Like, it was okay when the book said it, but saying it our loud- ew."

"Tsunami, try to do it properly. For God's sake." Starflight's flipping through his script, bored.

Tsunami breathes in, breathes out. "Rhett. I love Rhett. I've always loved him."

The only time Tsunami doesn't shine is when she's acting.

"Maybe this scene is too hard. Should we try one of the scenes in the front?" I sip on my green tea. Sunny is doing Moon's hair- they became best friends in, like, two seconds. I'm actually jealous. "Like, the one where Scarlett's learning about Ashley's engagement."

"Sure. Anything other than this cheesy stuff." Tsunami flips to the front. "Okay."

"Start."

The conversation goes like this:

Tsunami: "Ashley, getting engaged to Melanie! Oh, but it can't be true! Ashley's in love with me!"

Starflight: "No, he's not."

Deathbringer: "I'll be your father in this scene. Okay. Scarlett, what are you talking about? Ashley Wilkes is marrying Melanie Hamilton. You know his queerness. He should marry his own people- you can't understand him. Nobody can."

Tsunami: "But I'll change ALL THAT!"

Deathbringer: "Too much emotion."

Tsunami: "Who cares about this freaking play. God."

Deathbringer: "You should, because you have like the freaking main role."

Tsunami: "Just come to the drama club already, I'll give you the freaking main role."

Deathbringer: "I look too good in a dress. You guys will all faint."

Sunny: "Moon, what middle school are you planning to go to?"

Moon: "Jade."

Tsunami: "Deathbringer, give your script to Riptide. I want to look at him and do it and see if I can actually act if I'm actually looking

at someone hot."

Deathbringer: "Excuse me?"

It turns out she can't. Which makes her throw her script to the ground and start singing, which she also can't do. Everyone ends up singing karaoke with the TV in my room. Surprisingly, Sunny's the only one in the room that has a good voice.

The only time Starflight sets his book down is when Sunny starts singing.

☆

*Dear Daffodil,*

*I do have experience on that.*

*As someone that also never confessed, I think it's just about the right person.*

*Is that person familar with you? Are you guys close? That's the kind of questions you should ask.*

*Personally, I really can relate to that friendship line. It's natural to be scared, Daffodil, and I don't blame you for it. Especially if you guys have been friends for a long time. That is also very relatable- just make sure that if you want to keep the friendship, don't act too unnatural.*

*Dropping subtle hints might work. It hasn't worked for me, but it might for you .*

*-Helianthus*

# [14] Confession

[image]

☆Glory☆

*"Mom, don't go."*

*I'm at some place that I assume to be an airport . I can see a figure next to her- her husband.*

*Blonde hair, cold blue eyes. "Jambu- perfect family- Europe."*

*Don't go. I'm trying to shout the words, but nothing comes out. No. They can't go. No matter what she says, she must love me. I'm her daughter. She has to feel something for me, she can't just leave me like this.*

*She yanks her arm away, her mouthing tilting up into a sneer . "Did you think I loved you?" She's coming closer, whispering softly into my ear: "You were an accident."*

*I can see her husband next to her- Jambu's nowhere to be seen. He keeps pushing an uncooked piece of meat at my face.*

*"Think of what they will say when a girl with cancer-"*

*Anaconda's voice quickly increase until so many people are talking at once.*

*"Leukemia-"*

*"Accident-"*

*"Ruining my family, my fame, everything-"*

*"GO AWAY!"*

*"I DON'T WANT TO SEE YOU AGAIN!"*

*"I have decided- to go- Europe-"*

*"GLORY!"*

*"GLORY!"*

*"GLORY!"*

I wake up with a fever, my entire body wet with cold sweat.

~

"Ma, I want to wear Scarlett's green dress to the ball."

That's the one line that I say in every practice. It is also the line that Kestrel mocks me for, also in every practice after school. She mocks me so much that I find my head hurting even more. Add that to Scarlet Sky coming up to me in the morning asking me if I'm natural blonde with eyes that say, *I want to pluck out all your hair and make myself a wig.* Which makes me say yes, it is natural. Which leads her to ask me about my cancer with taunting eyes.

Tsunami says her lines almost emotionlessly. Although she does fit her role- Scarlett's as fiery and brave as much as she is- she just looks like her heart isn't in it.

"Ashley can't marry Melanie Hamilton! Ashley loves me! Maybe he just doesn't know." Tsunami clears her throat. "I know! I'll tell him that I love him at the barbeque tomorrow. Then he can marry me, instead of that boring girl."

"Very good, Tsunami." Kestrel's eyes are darting back and forth between me and her. "Bright! Glory Bright! You're supposed to go out after that scene."

*No, I'm not, we're supposed to say our prayers.* The words don't quite come out from ym mouth. I want to say something back, but then I look at Deathbringer below the stage, giving me a thumbs up when he meets my eyes. There's Riptide, who drove to our school just so he can see Tsunami for a few minutes afterwards. So I let it go.

"Go to page 7, when Scarlett's confessing to Ashley."

I hear Starlight's sigh as he comes up to the stage.

Tsunami's looking at him with unbidden discomfort. "Do I really have to confess my neverending love to Starflight before the entire school?"

Kestrel doesn't laugh, but she doesn't exactly scold, either. That woman. "Just do it."

"Ash-ley." Tsunami's dragging out the words. "I have something to tell you."

Starflight's trying to look down at her, although they're pretty much the same height. "Is it a secret, Scarlett?"

"Yes- I love you."

That *I love you* sounds so strange that I can't help but look at them. Oh- that's why. Tsunami's tilting her head so that she can see Riptide. And then her face goes completely red, and everyone laughs. But not everyone knows the reason behind the blush- that she had basically confessed to her boyfriend that she loved him. Starflight's pressing his lips together so he doesn't laugh, and looks at his script.

Starlight's good at that line- it's clear he practiced. "You're chasing after every man's heart in the barbeque, aren't you, Scarlett? Well, you know that I have always adored you...dear."

Even love can't keep Tsunami in character more than five minutes, and she makes a disgusted face. "So you have! I knew it."

"This is just a freaking play, in case you forgot," Starflight replies with a disgusted expression on his face. I go down the stage and sit next to Sunny, who's sitting next to Deathbringer.

"Starflight's been practicing, I think." Deathbringer whispers to Sunny. "Isn't he good?"

Sunny's staring at Starflight with a smile on her face. "Yeah, he's really good."

Deathbringer catches my eye, and he gives me a boyish grin, a strange sparkle in his eyes. "The famous Scarlett's Sister 1."

"Shut up." I look at Tsunami at the stage, and I have to admit I am a little jealous. I do want to play Scarlett, have so many lines to memorize and place all kinds of different emotions in every word. "She isn't appreciated enough. So much that she only has one line in the entire play. That's ridiculous."

"Tsunami really shines, doesn't she?" Riptide says randomly. And then he blushes. God, he's so cute. Not in a lover way. Like, in a favorite fictional male character way. The one that I have always liked in romance novels, the cute, kind boy that always got pushed out by the bad boy. "Sorry."

*Just freaking marry already.* "Yeah, except on stage," Deathbringer mutters.

"I don't think her heart's in it. If she tried, she probably could do it," Sunny says. But she seems a little tired, too. "Where's Clay?"

"Talking to his future wife," Deathbringer says lazily, leaning back on his chair. "Is actually blushing? God, he *is*."

"They'll grow up and have little redhead babies," I agree with a snort. "Peril, Clay. Clay, Peril. Cleril."

He doesn't miss a beat. "Riptide, Tsunami. Ripnami."

"Hey!" Riptide protests, but everyone knows he likes it. God, that cinnamon roll.

"Glory, Deathbringer. Glorybringer." Sunny's smiling in the dark, and I actually gape at her. That little devil.

"NO." We both say it at the same time, and Sunny finally bursts out laughing.

"Sunny, you've destroyed EVERYTHING." I am hiding my face with my hands because everything's too awkward. "Me- and him? Eww."

There, I have said it. *Take your hands off your face and look at him. Tell them you don't like him.*

Yeah, like that would be so freaking easy.

"You're right, Glory's so in love with me that everyone except her knows it," Deathbringer whispers with a smirk.

"Actually, I'm in love with myself."

His dark, dark eyes and the jet black hair that's falling over them. And me, unable to reach out and brush them to the side because the line of friendship is impossible to cross. Everything about him is sparkling. "That actually makes more sense."

Kestrel's voice: "GREATNESS! Come on up stage. Tsunami, we're done for today. And do something to your blue hair, for GOODNESS'S sake. Jg looks like freaking Dory pooped on it."

"Yeah, yeah, alright." Tsunami's rolling her eyes. Her hands go up to her hair immediately after, and I can tell it does bother her. Maybe the careless, sparkling Tsunami does care about what everyone else thinks. Maybe their words do bother her. Maybe she's so loud and smiling because she wants to hide everything that people might not like about her.

But then she sees Riptide next to us, and her doubting eyes light up. And they're walking towards each other like nobody else exists.

I always thought love was passionate, like a fire in your chest that got bigger, hot and beautiful and scary. But maybe it's not just that. Maybe it's just staring at someone's face and softly realizing that what everyone else thinks doesn't matter as long as that person loves it. Maybe it's meeting their eyes and unconsciously feeling yours sparkle. Maybe it isn't that much of a big deal, but even a bigger deal at the same time.

God, their vulnerability. It's like they don't even care if anybody else look at their eyes and know what they're thinking. They're just so open, so full of something I can't understand.

I watch them disappear in the darkness, and stand from my seat. My heart's starting to throb for no apparent reason, and I hate it. It makes me think of her, of Jambu, of Grandmother. "I'm going to go drink water."

"Let me go with you."

"No, it's alright." I am walking faster, my heart beating in tap tap tap beats. It's like someone's hammering my heart over and over again, and I don't exactly know why. My head is starting to lightly hurt. "I can go alone."

His voice. God, his voice. "Glory, are you alright?"

That's too frightening. Risking your entire bring for someone else. "Deathbringer, did you love her?"

He doesn't ask who, because he knows. I can hear from his voice that he's taken back, but he replies softly. "Yeah. I- I do."

"Didn't-Doesn't it hurt?" We're going out of the room. Surprisingly, I'm not thinking of him, but my mother. Anaconda. Because it hurts too badly to even try to trick myself that she didn't matter to me. It's too great, the darkness and the voices.

I'm leaning against the wall, wrapping my arms around my knees. "Loving someone. So-so risky."

Deathbringer sits down with me, leaning on the wall, mirroring my own movements. I'm looking into his eyes and his black bangs that gently hide them.

My own hair is falling into my eyes. I wonder what he sees in them, if he see the things I see in his. "It's is. It's so freaking hard and it's easy to mess up. And sometimes the circumstances are so hard. The people involved aren't always trying to hurt the other, sometimes it just flows that way."

"I'm so scared," I whisper. *So scared to look at someone with everything you have and realize that they don't care about you.*

Deathbringer gives me a smile. "It's supposed to be scary. Your every step has to be so careful, and they're so daunting. But look at Tsunami and Riptide- they're together and that's all that matters. In the end, it's about trust. So you do the best you can hoping they grow to know it."

"You sound like you've been into a lot of relationships." I mean, he has been. "But thanks, Deathbringer."

"I have. I mean, who can resist such a gentleman?" He reaches out and tucks the loose lock of blonde hair behind my ear. "See?"

I can't help but grin. His touch is electric, and although his fingers are gone the moment I realize what's happening, the magical affect takes place right away. His touch is soothing and aching at the same time.

"Sir, you are no gentleman," I say, with my best impression of Scarlett O'Hara. I reach out, too, and push the bangs to the side. His eyes are gentle and clear, and he's looking at me, only me. His lip tilt to one side, and he shows me one of his rare dimples.

"An apt observation," he replies, stroking his imaginary mustache. "And you, Miss, are no lady."

His lips, his eyes, his dimples always ask the same question. Maybe they always have, and I was too stupid to not realize it. It's a perfect scene- the sunlight from the big windows is shining on us, promising something. And his dark eyes are almost turning into this hot chocolate color, warm and comforting. *Do you trust me?*

Do I trust him? The charming boy that doesn't like to cry before anyone. The boy that flirts with every girl he meets, and unknowingly take their hearts. The boy with dark, dark eyes that seem brown when the sun shines on it. The boy with dimples. The boy that lends me a shoulder, that puts his arms around me when I need them. The boy that brushes my hair when he's feeling sad, the secret Gone with the Wind geek.

Do I trust this boy?

Yeah, I do.

My heart's thumping, and I'm thinking of Tsunami's vulnerable blue eyes and know that my own eyes are probably reflecting hers right now. The floor seems to be shaking- or maybe it's just my legs, thumping the floor along with the beat *tap tap tap* of my heart.

I'm thinking of Helianthus's advice of dropping subtle hints if I'm too scared to confess. But then, maybe Deathbringer *is* Helianthus. Maybe we have been exchanging emails all this time, talking about each other and not knowing it. Maybe.

Then I realize that I don't want to be a coward anymore.

I look up from the floor and stare at his face. *I trust you*. I don't feel my mouth opening, but before I know it, I'm telling him something in a whisper.

"I like you."

*Tap.*

"I like you, Deathbringer."

*Tap.*

"Do you- like me?"

...

*Tap.*

# [15] Selfish

[image]

☆Glory☆

"What are you guys doing here?"

I actually jump back with surprise.

I look up at Tsunami and Riptide and their tangled hands and heat rushes to my face. I wonder if they heard it. God.

With a slightly shocked expression, Tsunami gives me her hand, which I stare at before I rise to my feet. "Why are you guys outside?"

That's it. Deathbringer's going to turn everything into a joke, and I can just imagine it: *I just got a love confession from Scarlett Sister 1 before you guys came! Isn't that hilarious?* But he doesn't say a word.

I'm too scared to look at his face.

"I was feeling- a little dizzy." My voice is too high, and my heart is tap dancing in my chest. "And De- he came outside with me." I'm staring at the floor with embarrassment.

"You are blushing so hard, I thought you finally got a confession from Deathbringer or something." Tsunami throws her head back and laughs, but her voice isn't natural either.

"NO!" My hands are shaking, so I hide them in my pocket. "I mean- we were just talking. Talk to you later- Deathbrinwhdian." I can't look at him. I can't even say his full name, and he doesn't correct my pronounciation.

Is that a bad sign?

"Glory, I have something to tell you." That's when I realize it- Tsunami's blushing. "Let's go inside. Are you okay now?"

I'm yelping random words. "Yes! Of course! Sjwifnekdnw!"

Her arm goes around my shoulder as she whispers into my ear. With her other hand, she's touching her blue hair unconsciously like it's the most beautiful thing in the world. "He kissed me in the backstage. Nobody was there, and we snuck out through the door."

At the word *kiss*, I feel myself blushing again. "Wow. Wow. That's nice. That's really nice."

"Are you okay?" Tsunami quickly looks at me, with fear in her blue eyes. "Is it your- cancer?"

"No!" My mind seems to come back with the word cancer. It really is a magic word. "It's just really hot around here. That's all." I gulp, trying to calm myself. It works partly. "Aren't you going to practice?"

"Nobody cares about this stupid play," Tsunami brushes off, which kind of hurts. Because a lot of people do. "Riptide is way more important."

I don't know if I agree. Everything's so blurry, so silent compared to my overly loud heartbeats. "I- did you hear anything before you came out?"

"Nope. Was it something important?" Tsunami is barely looking at me. She turns back to Deathbinger and Riptide. "Deathbringer, what were you guys talking about before we came out of the door?"

You can do this. You can freaking do this.

I slowly turn with Tsunami, my eyes looking at Riptide's shoes, and then Deathbringer's hoodie, and then his face.

"Nothing special," he says smoothly, a lazy grin on his face. It's nothing out of the ordinary. When Tsunami shrugs and turns back, I keep looking at him. And he notices it, which makes his expression twist to something else.

I can't breathe.

He's giving me The Look.

☆

Why?

What did I do to deserve the Look?

"*Glory*! Are you listening to me?"

I look at her, and I realize that no, I haven't been listening to a word she has said the last twenty minutes. "Sorry, no."

We're in the car heading home, only Tsunami and me, because we live in the same direction. In the too-big house that scream out, *WE'RE RICH STARE AT US AND REALIZE THAT YOU'LL NEVER BE RICH ENOUGH TO LIVE IN SUCH LUXURIOUS HOUSES AHAHAHAHA*.

Apparently, Tsunami lives in one of the houses that's the biggest in town.

Tsunami's looking at me, disappointed, her hands gripping the script she'll never read. "This Saturday! I was asking if you could cover for me."

"Cover- what?" The Look. Why the heck was he looking at me like that?

"So I can sneak out to meet Riptide and tell Mom that I was over at your house practicing for the play. You know, the usual."

"But the play is in like a few months. You need to practice. You told me you wanted to practice." I don't know if the slight anger that's slipping from my voice is real. Or because I'm still thinking about that freaking look. Because apparently, I care so much about him that a look he gives me can change my entire mood for the day. Amazing.

"Woah. I know, but it's not like I'm going to get any better." Tsunami seems surprised at my reaction, but she quickly hides it with a smile. Her blue eyes are begging. "I suck, and you know

that."

I'm suddenly irritated. And maybe it's not about Deathbringer's facial expressions. Maybe I'm genuinely annoyed at Tsunami. Because the play really matters to me, because she can be a better Scarlett. "Then why are you in the drama club kn the first place?"

Tsunami's smile fades away. "Why are you being like this, Glory? You know I don't want to. I *know* I suck, okay? But my mom wanted me to be in the drama club and because that freaking Kestrel likes my mom I got the main role. It's not like I want to waste my time on a stupid play that NOBODY cares about."

"Then TELL YOUR MOM you don't want to be in the drama club!" My voice is rising. "Because some people actually care about the play, okay? Because whether you like it or not, you got the role and you're ruining everything!"

"IS IT MY FAULT that my mom forces me to do things? And I'm sorry if my acting freaking sucks, but it's not like I wanted the freaking role." Tsunami's trembling. "You don't even- you don't know my mom. She thinks I have to do everything she says. The moment I try to talk to her she- she-"

"You can at least practice to show us you freaking give a crap about the play," I spit out. "Instead of running off with your boyfriend all the time."

"Oh, I see what it is." Tsunami's frown turns into an angry sneer. "You want the role? You think my acting sucks, so you think I should just get off the club because you think you'd do better?"

"Yeah, exactly." It isn't what I thought of at all, but maybe there is some truth to her words. "Better than seeing you running around ruining everyone's play whining all the time that your mommy's place got you into a good role when you don't DESERVE IT. Because I can actually *act.* And not got a role because my mom's a freaking writer and I can't tell her my feelings."

"Oh, we're talking about moms?" Tsunami had this weird expression on her face. And I know she knows. Her blue eyes are screaming

with pain and anger. "Maybe you should mind your own family business- then maybe they won't be abandoning you."

My voice is cold. "Shut up."

Tsunami's sneer fades away. "Glory, no, I'm sorry. I will practice, I shouldn't have- I-"

That's it, the anger is bursting, making everything shatter into little pieces, burning everything. "Yeah, we ARE talking about moms. And you- you're a COWARD for not talking to your mom. Just admit you're scared to face your mommy, just say you're TOO SELFISH ABOUT YOUR OWN NEEDS BECAUSE NOTHING ELSE IS IMPORTANT TO YOU. THE PLAY, THE PEOPLE WORKING FOR IT, NOTHING."

It's almost funny how people- people that cared about you, placed their arms over your shoulder, told you what they did backsyage- react when you say hurtful things to them. And how you react when they say hurtful things back.

Another funny thing is how the best of friends can turn into enemies over couple words. Except they aren't just words.

"Shut up. Shut up talking about everything like you know things about me." Tsunami's trembling, and it's the first time I see her really angry. "SHUT UP."

"YOU'RE SELFISH."

"I think I can DECIPHER MY OWN FEELINGS WITHOUT YOU TELLING ME CRAP YOU MADE UP IN YOUR BRAIN."

We're shouting now, it's actually a wonder that the driver is still driving. Tsunami's eyes whip to him. "I'm going to walk. I'M GOING TO WALK, STOP HERE!"

I'm spitting out random words. "NO YOU'RE NOT, YOU FREAKING CAMEL BRAINED BANANAS."

"WATCH ME YOU LITTLE GOBLIN DONUT." The car stops, and I surprise the driver by getting off with her.

"YOU LITTLE WALNUT FACE! SEAWEED HAIR!" I'm screaming, and Tsunami's running towards her house. I run with her.

"DON'T FOLLOW ME YOU ARROGANT LITTLE TURTLE STALKER!" Tsunami's screaming back, and I don't even realize how funny her insults are. They just sound like insults.

"I'M NOT DONE! STAND THERE! I'M NOT DONE TALKING TO YOU!" I'm barely breathing, and Tsunami's so fast. But I spot a blue, six-story house, and just know it's hers. And I see the lady standing on the front porch.

God.

Tsunami sees her before I do and turn. But then she walks back, her shoulders raised. And that stupid blue-haired little girl that screamed at me about my mom a minute ago. I can't help but admire her, even a little bit.

"Tsunami," Coral's voice is low and deadly. She speaks silently, but even I can hear her. "You have- dyed your hair, I suppose? And created all that racket with your friend over there."

Well, this day is absolutely beautiful. "Hello!" I say it with as much politeness as I can muster. Tsunami has frozen, and I awkwardly walk towards her. "I'm Tsunami's classmate, Glory Bright."

"Well, you guys were having fun yelling at each other." Coral walks up to us. Her hair is dark and short, wearing a blue dress that comes up to her ankles. What's up with this family and blue? "Tsunami, your drama teacher told me today that you snuck out of the gym with a boy named- Riptide?" She doesn't even glance at me. Well, thanks a lot. "You know exactly what I told you about boys. You date who I choose you to date. And that boy- where did you meet him? In the dump?"

I blurt out the words before I can thinking everything over. God, this woman is scarier than I thought. I think back to Tsunami's words in the car and realize what she meant about her mom. "Riptide's my boyfriend." Her eyes finally look at me, and they make me flinch. They widen for a moment, which makes her seem like a

freaking witch. Goodness, woman, look into the mirror. "Tsunami was- was helping me get his number. Like, his telephone number."

Well, I guess I just defended her. Tsunami looks over to me with surprise, and I can't do anything but shrug.

She clenches her fists.

"Glory," she says quietly. "You're right about what you said in the car. Mom. Riptide's my boyfriend and I don't want to hide it. I'm proud of him. And I want to go back to swimming. Because I don't have any talent in acting, and I don't like it. I can't bring myself to like it. I'm sorry, but it's true."

"Tsunami." Coral's voice is getting colder, and there's something in her eyes that makes me think of Anaconda's husband. "Come into the house and we'll talk. Glory, dear, please go to your house for today."

"No!" Tsunami's eyes are nothing like what I have seen before. Tears are dripping from her stunning, strong blue eyes. "We'll talk now! Please, Mom, please-"

*Slap.*

"Get inside. Now."

I look at Tsunami's red cheek. *Grandmother never hits me.* Maybe Tsunami was right. Maybe this woman is more horrible than I could have thought.

"NO!" Tsunami's fully sobbing. "You're going to guilt trap and make me think I have to match your expectations! You won't- just LISTEN TO ME!"

"You'll act in the play and that's final. If you meet that boy again-"

"LISTEN TO ME!"

*Slap.*

Faster faster lighting, Coral grabs Tsunami's uniform collar and

shakes her. "We'll go into the house. Before anybody sees us. Don't say a word."

Tsunami's trying to shake away, but she's crying harder and getting dragged away.

"LISTEN TO YOUR DAUGHTER!" Somebody's shouting, and then I realize it's me. "SHE DOESN'T WANT TO ACT AND SHE SUCKS AT IT! LET HER SWIM FOR GOD'S SAKE!"

I grab Tsunami's shirt and jerk as hard as I can, which sends her flying into the yard. And then we're running together, Coral screaming behind us.

Tsunami's sobs fade away, and we're running out of there in silence when Tsunami bursts out laughing, her voice hoarse from crying. "Did you just yell at freaking Coral the New York Times author?"

I'm gasping for breath, but I'm smiling. "Come to my house. I'll tell my grandmother- I'll tell her what happened. I'm sorry if what I did-"

Tsunami stops to breathe. "Don't apologize. Don't." She looks into my eyes. "Thank you, Glory. I'm the one that should apologize."

Before we know, we're wrapping each other in our arms.

☆

*Dear Helianthus,*

*Can you tell me who you are? I have an idea of your identity, although I might be wishing too much.*

*I confessed to the boy. I know you told me to drop subtle hints, but I really wanted to get everything over with.*

*I probably should have followed your advice, because he gave me a really strange look. I couldn't hear his answer, but I think it's a no.*

*If you are who I think you are , you'll probably know who I am. If you aren't, maybe we can help each other. Consider my case a failure--*

*perhaps I can help yours.*

*-Duffodil*

# [16] Rejection

[image]

☆Glory☆

*Dear Daffodil,*

*I'm afraid I can't answer your question. However, I am glad you confessed. You're far braver than I am. Although I dare say, I don't think I'm the person you think-- or wish-- that I am.*

*However, I do want to hear your questions, and also hear what happened between you and your crush. Perhaps I can help you. I hope they say yes, because you genuinely sound like a good person.*

*I don't know if you would find this creepy, but I searched up your name. Daffodils apparently mean rebirth and new beginnings. Maybe, even if you do get a rejection in return, you'll be able to move on. You seem like a very strong person, which isn't much, because I barely know you. But you remind me of a person I know in real life-- and they are very brave.*

*Maybe you should search my name. That might give you some answers.*

*-Helianthus*

I am surprised. Their name is also a flower. He also reminds me of a person--can he really be Deathbringer?

☆

"No."

My bad mood starts with one word.

Tsunami comes to school with a red mark on her cheek. A lot of people ask her why, but she doesn't answer. She only changes the subject of the conversation without a word. She also announces that she's quitting drama club to swim again. Although everyone protests along with Kestrel, all it takes for them to accept it is a few

words from Tsunami: "You know my acting sucks." Grudgingly, they agree.

It is all it takes- one day- for Tsunami to become one of our family. Grandmother calls Coral and ignores her protests while doing it. Grandmother threatens to take a picture of Tsunami's face and take it to court, which leads Tsunami to stay at our house for a week.

And then there's Deathbringer, who likes to act that I don't exist, and that he didn't hear a word of what I said yesterday. He's making an effort of not looking at me, but it's the end of lunch, and I go to his side while throwing out the food.

And-ah, The Look.

It's the face Deathbringer wears when he passes a girl that disgusts him.

The girl in second grade, the one that confessed and had to face the cold shoulder. He gave her the look, fiercer as time passed, when they passed each other in the hallway.

It's a look that says, *We could have been perfect friends and you ruined it with your unnecessarily romantic sentiments. You ruined everything, and now I can't bring myself to talk to you. The fact you view me as more than a friend disgusts me.*

That's why I have been holding back. And now he's showing me the thing I was afraid of the most.

It's a face that also says, *So you fell in my trap, too. And I thought you* wouldn't.

It says, *you ruined everything.*

My voice isn't working. When it does come out, it's so hoarse that I can barely recognize it. I'm holding his wrist, stopping him from going further, looking into his dark eyes. "Answer my question."

"What question?" So that's the way he's going to go. Crushing my heart over and over again. But what did I expect? Deathbringer likes sparkling, special girls. Greatness, with her choppy black hair

and daring brown eyes, is one of those girls. I'm just realizing that I can never become one of them.

"You know. What I said yesterday." My eyes are stinging. *Don't shake it off like a joke. Anything else but that. The confession-- it had my everything.* "Don't act like you don't. Just tell me the answer and let's get everything over with."

"I have to get to class." Deathbringer's voice seems desperate, even a little tired. "Let me go, Glory."

"Just- answer." I know the answer now- he's slapping my face with it over and over again. But I can't quite accept it until the word comes out of his mouth. "Please."

He's looking at me. The expression on his face is not the Look, exactly. But it's the face of a person who's getting ready to reject someone. "No."

"No?"

My head throbs. *Then what was it that I was chasing, after all this time? My exchanged emails, my waiting, my heartaches and throbs- what were they for? For this little word, one word, of rejection?*

His voice is firm. "No. You asked if I liked you, and I think you meant more than a friend. I'm sorry, Glory. But no."

Of course it was me that got ahead of everything. It was me, all this time, thinking so many people loved me when nobody really did. Risking my heart for nothing. Opening a present to find nothing there, and now questioning my excitement and eagerness before.

"Glory." His eyes are begging. The eyes that seemed so warm and beautiful a few moments before. Now, I can't bear to look at them- the fear and pity. "Let's stay friends. Nothing more. I'm- I'm sorry. I just...I don't plan on having another relationship after-- Greatness."

*Greatness. Maybe you would have, if I was anything close to her. If I was special enough to catch your eye.*

Then I realize*, why? Why do I have to put down myself just because I*

*can't match your expectations? Why can't you like me for who I am?*

I know it's not his fault, but I hate him for it. And he sees the hatred in my eyes, but all I can see in return is pity. It's not what I want. It's nothing close to what I want.

*Why are you always risking your heart, Glory? Why are you assuming all the time, wanting more than what people can give you?*

"No, I'm sorry for saying anything." It hurts. My eyes are closing and opening, and I can't exactly block out the pain. "Yeah, let's not-- let's stay friends. That'll be the best." So much hate and love mixed into the words I spit out.

I wonder if he knows how much he's hurting me with his rejection. If he ever knew how much courage it took to say them aloud.

He wouldn't. Because he has never been rejected in his entire life. That makes me seem more stupid, but I know it's true.

"No. No, Glory. Don't say that." He's looking at me, and I quickly drop my eyes to the floor. "Glory, I'm sorry. Please tell me we'll stay friends. Please." His voice starts trembling. That's a surprise. "You don't know-- you don't know what I did. I can't possibly have you as a-- a lover. It would be wrong. You don't understand, Glory, you would never forgive me if I told you."

*Put on a smile and tell him it's okay.*

Then I realize it's not okay. So I do neither.

Rejection. I never thought it would be this bad, but my feelings are mixed with embarrassment and darkness. It's even worse than the rejection with Anaconda- risking and shattering your heart for the second time.

Seeing that I'm not saying a word, Deathbringer turns away. And he seems more hurt than I am-- how dare he? How dare he seem hurt, when he was the one rejecting? He can't feel half the pain as I am feeling right now. Hurt pride and embarrassment leads to anger and hatred. And I'm too prideful to not direct them at him.

Deathbringer's going into the hallway, leaving me, and I catch Greatness watching us. What is it on her face? Pity? Disbelief? Annoyance? I hate every one of them. Before I know, I'm leaving the lunchroom, arriving at my locker, taking out my books noiselessly.

I hate them. I hate Anaconda, I hate Deathbringer. Most of all, I hate myself.

Everything hurts.

☆

# [17] New Beginnings (1)

[image]

☆Glory☆

*Dear Helianthus,*

*I was surprised to see that your name meant. What's the meaning behind it?*

*I was rejected, but turning back to your last email, I think I'll be okay. I'm going to move on. Although rejection really is painful, it also leaves you free. Kind of. But yeah, it mostly hurts. At first, I really hated the person that rejected me, but I think I was being a little stupid. It's not their fault. Then I thought that maybe I could match their expectations-- they have a very particular type of who they want to date-- but I realized that I didn't want to change myself for someone. I'm kind of done with that. I do want to keep our friendship, and they did too. So we're working on that, although it is a little hard.*

*I think I'm going to focus on myself for a little while. I see that you were avoiding my statement than I could help you with your case. Of course, I don't want to pressure you into it.*

*I still can't shake off the thought that I do know you in real life.*

*Question 1: have you ever rejected someone, and how do you treat them afterwards? And what, if you did, are your reasons for rejecting a person?*

*Question 2: Do you think I can stay friends with the boy that rejected me? I really want to hear your opinion on the matter.*

*Thank you so much for exchanging emails with me. I'm not the sentimental type, but they always are a great help.*

*-Daffodil*

☆

"Glory, come on! Write your name, for God's sake!" Tsunami's grinning. "WRITE IT!"

I roll my eyes, but I obediently write my name on the clipboard. Sunny laughs as Tsunami throws her arms in the air. That crazy girl with blue eyes. I love her.

Deathbringer's not there. He has never been there lately. The only time I see him is lunch, and even then we won't talk. He tried to talk to me a couple times, but it was awkward.

"Who else has signed up for it?" Sunny looks at the clipboard with squinting eyes. "Only one. Scarlet-- their handwriting is so messy-- Sky, I think?" Then all of us look at each other with disbelief. "Oh. Scarlet-- *the* Scarlet."

"Yes, it's me." Scarlet Sky, her arm wrapped around Peril, flashes us a smile. Her poorly dyed red hair-- so poorly done that it's actually a shade of orange-- and deep, slithering voice. Her eyes shine everywhere she goes, so much so that it makes people look at it again. Challenging yellow, shining even more surrounded by the dark mascara and eyeliner. She smirks. "Hi, Glory."

"Yes, ignore everyone else that is beside Glory," Tsunami mutters darkly. To make a point, she replies lightly, "Hi, Peril!"

Everyone knows who Scarlet Sky is. I learned about her the first day of school. A year older, with her skirt shortened so badly that it's a wonder I can't see her butt when she walks. She's famous for her stepfather, Chameleon, who apparently runs a very big company. Which makes her act like she's better than everyone else.

"God, you get prettier as time passes," Scarlet gushes, reaching out to touch my hair. I squirm uncomfortably. "And Sunny, I swear you're so small and thrilling that I actually want to stuff you with cotton and hang you on my bedroom wall. Burn, wouldn't that be thrilling?"

Burn, the captain of the volleyball team, nods grimly. Her blonde hair is tied back, and she is wearing her team jersey. She looks at Sunny like she actually wants to stuff her with cotton. "Yes."

Sunny forcibly smiles, but I can tell Scarlet's gang is scaring her. "Um. Thanks?"

"You would look way better if you allowed me to put makeup on you," Scarlet says with a haughty grin. "Look at me. Don't I look dashing?" As if to make a point, she wiggles her fingers-- they are decorated with rings.

"No, thank you," I reply automatically.

"Oh, I'm sorry." Scarlet looks down at me, her eyes flashing like she's looking at a prey, not a person. Scarlet Sky really scares me. "Is it bad for your cancer thing?"

Another thing about Scarlet: she turns everything in to freaking cancer. I don't reply, and Tsunami rolls her eyes. "I think we have to get to cla--"

"Peril, who do you think is prettier, me or Glory?" Scarlet doesn't even look at Tsunami, making her bristle.

"Um. You, I think." Peril looks at me apologetically. "Did you get new shoes, Scarlet?"

"Yes, I did, Chameleon got it for me." Peril flinches at the world Chameleon. Scarlet looks at me triumphantly, a sneer on her face. I sometimes worry about her mental health. "He knows what it's like to have a beautiful stepdaughter. Because one of his accidents-- they weren't really as good as me. That's what he says, anyway." Scarlet is now staring at Peril, enjoying the look of discomfort she sees on her face. I wonder why Scarlet's bragging would make her wince.

"You have a really bad obsession that you have to be the prettiest in the room." Burn looks annoyed, and she says the words everyone wants to say. I kind of begin to see her in a new light. "Let's go, we'll be late for class."

"Burn, you wouldn't know," Scarlet remarks jokingly. Although with her, it actually might not be a joke. "Nobody wants ugly things. Ugly things get broken and abandoned. Don't you agree, Peril?"

"Yeah," she mutters in return. Peril's blue eyes are glassy. "Of

course."

Scarlet seems satisfied, and she waves to us. "Bye, we'll be going now."

Nobody says the exact words, but I'm pretty sure from the looks on Sunny and Tsunami's faces that we're all thinking the same thing: *Thank God.*

☆

"As God is my witness," I'm clenching my fists, holding up the carrot in my hands. "As God is my witness they're are not going to lick me." I'm breathless. "I'm going to live through this and when its all over, I'll never be hungry again. No, nor any of my folk." Emphasis on the next line. "If I have to lie, steal, cheat, or kill, as God is my witness I'll never be hungry again!"

Moon and Tsunami clap. "Bravo, Glory."

"Should I try again?"

Moon shakes her head, a thoughtful look on her face. "No. Hear me out. You know what would be good?"

"What, Moon?" Acting is way harder than I expected. I toss the carrot to Moon, who obediently sets it down the counter as she talks.

"You should ask Jambu for advice, instead of a housekeeper's daughter. I mean, your-- his mom is an actor. He probably knows more."

That's actually a good idea. But then, there may be really bad consequences. "But he only comes at weekends, and I'm kind of scared that he'll tell the-- woman-- if I ask for advice. Or worse, his weird dad."

"That's true." Moon frowns. "Or Deathbringer. I saw last time that he was helping Tsunami. Isn't he a good teacher, Tsunami?"

Tsunami shudders. "A good teacher? Nope. Add haughtiness and

small acting skills and the word 'again'. That explains everything about him."

"He's busy," I say quickly. "And yeah, he's a horrible teacher."

Maybe rejection lasts longer than I thought. It can be a throb whenever he passes, but it also can be fear to look into his eyes because I might see the Look again. It can be stuttering when he asks me something, and always worrying that what I do might make him uncomfortable.

"Well then. Let's do it again. Try to put more emotion, I guess? It doesn't seem too real." Moon's honesty stings sometimes, but it's what I need now. "We should totally get you a brown wig for the job, though. Maybe wearing a dress will-"

"NOPE," I say loudly. And we practice again and again. I'm actually happy while doing it.

Acting always seemed distant, something that reminded me of my mother. Maybe I was even jealous of it in a sense- it was the thing that made mother abandon me, after all. The fame and acting and money. I would look at her on TV, where she shined, and realize over and over again that she seemed happy without me, when I was miserable without her. Always weighed down by a feeling of not being enough, of never shining enough.

But I'm going to shine, just like she does. I'm going to look at Kestrel straight in the eye and offer her something she can't refuse.

Scarlett O'Hara. Maybe she means more to me than I ever realized.

# [18] New Beginnings (2)

[image]

☆Glory☆

"I'm going to try out for Scarlett O'Hara in three days," she announces as she sits next to us in the gym. Sunny eyes her with nervousness. "We literally share the same name, don't we? How thrilling."

Starflight speaks up. "Actually, yours end with one *t* and the character's name ends with--"

"Shut up." Scarlet looks at us, her eyes remaining at me for a long time. Her voice changes into something dripping with honey. "God, tell me your eyes are contacts, because if they aren't I'll be, like, freaking jealous."

"They aren't," I reply carefully. Scarlet's eyebrows raise, her eyes sparkling with interest. If a normal person told me they were jealous of my eyes, I would feel slight appreciation. But when she says it, she actually sounds like she wants to pluck my eyes out.

"You sound, like, really haughty," Scarlet says with a giggle. "I'm sorry. Is it a cancer thing or something? Thinking you're better than everyone else? Sorry, but it's not like you're *that* prettier than me. It was just a compliment. Like, when you compliment someone to get to know them better when you don't really mean it."

Leave it to Scarlet to make everything about cancer and beauty competition. "Sorry if I was rude, I was just replying to your question--"

"I don't care, let's talk about something else. Did I tell you I was going to try out for Scarlett? Because, obviously, I'm the prettiest one here and Scarlett's supposed to be pretty, right?"

Silence.

"Glory's also going to try out for Scarlett," Clay says bravely. "And she's really good."

"Um. Who are you?" Scarlet laughs at him, showing off her red nails as she covers her mouth. She flashes me an angry look. "Who are you trying out for, a fat circus man?" She turns to Peril for support, but Peril's lips are tightly pressed together.

"He's who your friend has been flirting with." Heat rushes to my face when Scarlet looks at Clay with laughing eyes.

She ignores my statement, although she does flash Peril a look of disbelief when Peril doesn't deny it. "So you're really trying out for the role?" Her voice has changed. "You? But I thought you had-- a disease. What was it? Leukemia?"

That took a turn, because Scarlet manages to ruin freaking everything. I would have brushed it off at any other day, but not today. I genuinely want to know why she's always talking about my cancer. "What does it have to do with anything? Why do you-- always make *everything* about leukemia?"

"I mean, what if you die or something while we were doing the play? I'm genuinely worried-- shouldn't you be in the hospital, sweetie? And if you're trying out, you're obviously going to get it because Mrs. Kestrel pities cancer children." Scarlet looks at her red nails without much interest, pouting. I have heard about her meanness, but right now she seems like she spits out hurtful things to people for fun. So Kestrel pities me, huh? I wonder what would have happened if she didn't pity me, because even her pitying stage is a literal hell. "Also, isn't leukemia contagious?"

Damn you and your ugly orange hair.

"I think I know my condition better than you, sweetheart," I spit back in return. "And no, leukemia isn't freaking contagious, go educate yourself for God's sake. Aren't you older? Maybe you shouldn't spend your time trying out for a role you aren't going to get and go study if you actually want to go to college. I'm shocked at your ignorance."

Scarlet lowers her hand to glower at me coldly. Probably because I haven't had the courage to talk back to her for a long time. "I'm sorry I don't want to educate myself on a disease I'm never going to get, unlike you. I also have a longer lifespan than a cancer patient, so I probably will have more time to study. Because you're going to die soon, right? Is that why everyone's worshiping you, because they feel sorry? Although, no offense. Did what I say offend you? I really don't want to offend cancer children, everyone will attack me for it."

Stay calm.

You've had this before, Glory. People taunt you all the time. It's nothing new. You should stay calm, ignore them, and move on with your life.

I lower my voice, looking into her ugly yellow eyes. "Yes, it did, your idiotic words freaking offended me so freaking much. Please don't insult my friend for his weight and me for a disease I have no control over."

I fail at keeping calm.

"Do I look like an idiot?" Scarlet pushes my shoulder, which makes me walk backwards, and it takes me a while to regain my balance. Her voice is dangerously low. "Do I look like an idiot to you? Do you think I won't be able to attack you because you have cancer and is pretty? I can see through you, you little piece of trash."

"Indeed." *Shut up, Glory. Shut up before you get beat up by this crazy psychopath.*

I don't shut up.

Scarlet offers me a sneer. "Thrilling." Then, she reaches out and slaps me across the face. The sound echoes around the gym-- as I fall to the ground, I see people staring at us with astonishment.

"Glory!" It's Clay's voice-- he's holding Scarlet back. Scarlet's whips to Clay, disgust on her face. "Peril, GET HIM OFF ME!" Peril's looking at them, back and forth, her hands over her mouth. Seeing

Peril hesitate, Scarlet turns to Clay and punches him on the face, rings and all. Sunny's screaming, and Starflight is calling for the teacher as he heads toward us. Clay's cheek is bleeding as he falls, and suddenly Scarlet's kicking his stomach. All I can see is blood.

She looks at me when I grab her foot. Her yellow eyes are crazier than before at the sight of blood. "I'm going to kill you. I'll end you before your cancer can and pluck your eyes out," she hisses softly before she raises her foot again, this time in my direction. Her hands are clenched into a fist.

I think about grabbing her and begging her to stop.

I reach inside my jeans pocket and spray her face with pepper spray instead.

☆

I'm in the car, fidgeting nervously, when Grandmother comes into the car. Tsunami's hands are clenched into a fist as she looks out the window. "Is Clay okay, Grandmother?"

"He's currently in the hospital. So is the girl you sprayed at."

"I don't care about her, how is he? Did you hear anything about him?"

"His cheek is bruised, and there was a lot of blood. I'm not sure about his stomach, but he'll be alright. Honestly, the girl had her fingers swollen and she was writhing in pain because of the spray."

I sigh in relief until Grandmother turns to me, a scary look in her eyes. "Glory, I am very disappointed in you. I gave you the pepper spray for your safety, not to use it on your schoolmate. Thank God the school has no rules against pepper spray because there's so many famous kids there. I convinced your principal that you had many stalkers over the few years and you had to have them. Reluctantly, he agreed."

"Cancer perk."

She ignores me. "You will get punishment for using it, though. We

did agree that the girl got quite out of hand, so the principal agreed that you acted on self-defense. Starlight-"

"*Starflight*, Grandmother-"

"He recorded a voice recorder of your conversation, and turned it in. Everyone was outraged."

Silence.

"Am I suspended?"

"For two days, yes." Grandmother softens when she sees my red cheek. "I swear that I'll get the girl out of that school. Please start driving, Secretkeeper."

"Mrs. Bright, what exactly happened?" Tsunami doesn't bother to hide her fists. "Glory told me some parts, but she was too anxious about Clay to say anything. Something about Scarlet Sky?"

"She insulted Clay and said stuff about my leukemia." Now that I'm explaining it to her, it's almost funny. "She slapped me on the face and when Clay tried to stop her she went on full psycho mode and told me to pluck my eyes out and tried to hit me. That's when I pepper sprayed her."

"Well, that was awesome." Tsunami shrugs, although her eyes are sparkling. "They're suspending you for *that*? Nobody likes Scarlet. She's a literal demon. Did you see what she said to you when we were writing your name on the clipboard? I knew something was going to happen."

"Tsunami!" Grandmother says. But she's almost smiling. "But honestly, girls, she deserved it."

"I- what?" I'm astonished. "Grandmother, did you just tell me I did well to spray someone?"

"Hush." Her smile is stretching. "Girls, what would you like for dinner?"

"I'm not really hungry," I reply, grinning, as I close my eyes and

think of Scarlet's expression when I sprayed her. I wonder if Deathbringer heard.

New beginnings. It started with rejection from my best friend. Now, I'm wrapping everything up by pepper spraying my enemy in the face.

New beginnings are sweeter than I realized.

# [19] In Your Eyes

[image]

☆Glory☆

*Dear Daffodil,*

*1: I have rejected a person. They are a bubbly person with a very kind personality. I'm not sure why in the world they like me, but they did confess to me a couple months ago. My reasons for rejecting them? It obviously wasn't that they were not "enough." It's just that didn't feel any romantic attraction towards them. Maybe I would have, if I didn't have the girl I had a crush on for years. I could kind of tell that she did like me, but I was always hoping she wouldn't confess- selfish, I know- just because I didn't want the friendship we had to get ruined.*

*It did get ruined after she confessed . I didn't know how to act normally around her, and although she told me it was fine, I was too sorry about everything . And also because she knows about my crush on the girl . I did try to make myself like her, but I guess it just wasn't it.*

*But reasons for rejecting can vary from person to person . Maybe they are afraid of being in a relationship. Maybe they're afraid of ruining the friendship, and don't want you to confess because of that. Just keep in mind that it's not your fault .*

*2: Personally, I wouldn't be able to stay friends with a person that rejected me. Seeing them with another person, or flirting with another person is alright when they don't know my feelings . But if I do confess and I stay with them , I'll be too harsh on myself, always comparing me to the person my crush is interested in . Because them knowing your feelings , rejecting them , and moving on is another matter entirely.*

*However, I think you might be different. How long have you known this boy? Are you guys close friends ? Are you willing to risk hurting just to stand by his side? There's nothing wrong with that , but it does need some serious thinking.*

*I also like exchanging emails with you. I can never imagine having these kinds of conversations with another person in real life. Nobody would actually take me seriously. So thank you . I think I have made a really good friend (well this got cheesy fast, didn't it?).*

*-Helianthus*

☆

*Deathbringer, I want to tell you something.*

*I've had my feelings for you since middle school. Crazy, I know. I wonder if you knew all this time, and was just kind enough to not acknowledge it.*

*You might ask what made me like you . Before middle school, you were a drama queen with really, really, really x1000 bad puns and jokes. You also excelled at life that age. You were so different from me- you ran around, shouted, teased girls, did things that I could never do because of my disease . And I envied you for it- sometimes I even wished that I could trade my body with yours . Yeah , I was that evil.*

*Although we were good friends before middle school, we always had a line between us. Because we were so different - you with your dimples and laughs. And me, with my disease and silence.*

*The truth is, it hadn't been long since my mom left . I didn't know much, except that she didn't want me. And I was so miserable that I almost forgot how to smile. Grandmother was too prideful to try to contact her, but even at that age I heard her crying at night. I thought everything was my fault, that I had wrecked the entire family with my existence . And maybe that's not far from the truth .*

*Middle school. A lot of adults say it's an age when you don't know much, and maybe that's true. But as I grew older, I saw more things , learned more things. I saw how girls whispered about you and how I didn't have any friends when you chose to not be a partner with me in group projects . How teachers looked at me with pity because nobody tried to come to me. And when they did, they also pitied me. Nobody wanted to be around the girl with rainbow choppy hair when they could be with their other friends.*

*You have no idea- how much it meant to me that you brushed all of your friends to be a partner with me. It was like getting chosen, somebody telling me that I was special enough . And every time you came up to me and asked, you seemed like a savior in my eyes.*

*I don't know if you remember, but you dived into the ocean without a second thought when you thought I was drowning. It was in sixth or seventh grade, and we were going to a trip at the ocean. Everybody was swimming, and so were you. That was the day I almost drowned.*

*It was a day, nothing special, that nobody really tended to remember. It was a pretty sunny day at the beach, and everyone was excited. But it was a day that they would all forget in a few years.*

*But it was the day I realized I liked you . A lot.*

*I didn't go into the ocean because it might be dangerous for the leukemia. So, naturally, I insisted that you join your friends in the ocean. You stubbornly refused, but you finally gave up and went swimming. I sat in the tent for a while, alone, watching everyone play. I remember the date- July twenty-first- because it was the day that my mom's new movie was premiering. Everyone at school was talking about it , excited.*

*It was also the day I planned to kill myself.*

*I might not have known much according to people , but I did know that my birth was supposed to be a secret. I couldn't tell anyone who my mother was because she was simply ashamed of me. Grandmother cried to sleep once in every few days because she missed her daughter , who barely contacted us. You know all the details. I also saw that kids were playing in the ocean, laughing and spraying each other- you were one of them- and they seemed so happy.*

*I actually thought it all out- I didn't want anything to be messy, so I planned on hanging, quietly in my room while everyone was asleep. I knew I had to do it outside , so they wouldn't have trouble burying me in the yard. I didn't want any backlash on my mother . It was pretty stupid,and maybe I knew it wouldn't work all that easily , but I was determined to do it .*

*And then I thought to myself , alone in the blue tent: why not do it now?*

*They could just frame it as an accident- leukemia patient got too deep in the ocean and was found dead after an hour or something like that. I could sneak out of the tent, go inside the water while the teacher was occupied or something, and walk into the deep waters, quickly, before anybody spotted me.*

*I actually did it . I got a tube from the teacher, told her I wanted to just wet my feet. She nodded, giving me one of those pitiful smiles that only a teacher can give, and when she went into the tent, I walked slowly to towards the water. I kind of went near the direction you were playing. Maybe deep inside, I wanted you to stop me. And you did.*

*I kind of swam until I couldn't feel the floor. The water was so cold. I thought it would grab me at any second, clutching me, dragging me under those beautiful, fierce ripples.*

*And then I let go of the tube. I let my arm slide, and it only took a second for me to let go of the oxygen, of the clear blue sky, of the laughter and smiles and splashes.*

*And then there was silence .*

*After a few moments of sinking, I realized I simply couldn't breathe. Which sounds stupid, but it was a slow, agonizing experience. First , I just kind of went down peacefully, my hand barely holding the tube. And then, I let go of the oxygen , slowly, feeling the water ripple from my nose . I didn't dare open my eyes, and when I finally ran out of oxygen, I kind of twisted back and forth, realizing that my lungs were burning .*

*Then I realized that I didn't really want to die, not like this.*

*So I started waving my arms and legs hysterically. Before long, I had gulped the water. Breathed it in, feeling the horrible pain and feeling that something was bursting into fireworks and I was screaming and nobody could hear me because there was only silence.*

*Silence.*

*Then you came.*

*You probably know how the story goes. Of course , the lifeguard probably got to me first , but you were there when I started coughing out water. That begin the teasing whenever we went near water, and I never had the courage to tell you what I was really planning that day.*

*The thing was, you noticed that I was swimming towards the deep water, and you were shouting for me when I let go. There was somebody shouting for me reaching for me beneath the wall of silence, and it was you .*

*Well , guess who likes to tell cheesy stories? Meee!*

*I'm not asking you for pity. But I want you to know that what you did- just simply noticing that I was gone- meant so much to me. Maybe a bit more than you would ever know .*

*When I woke up, you were there.*

*You have no idea what you looked like that day, when I looked at you in the corner of my eye while coughing out a water fountain. You were there, breaking the horrible silence, the peace, the quietness that I struggled to keep because I wanted to hide everything- you were messing it around , shattering it, playing with it . You had reached out and heard my screams although I was screaming underwater.*

*And I liked it.*

*I know you rejected me. You rejected my feelings , told me that you wanted to stay friends. One of my friends say that it will only hurt me to stay with you as a friend. To look at you talking to other girls, knowing you have rejected me.*

*But I think I'll risk that. Because I want to be there for you like you have always been there for me. Because I want to reach out , too, and mess up your underwater silence. Telling you to grab my hand, that I heard the screams that you worked so hard to keep hidden. Because I wanted to hear them. Because I wanted to look good in your eyes, just like you looked good in mine.*

*That raises a question. Do you ever wonder what you look like in other people's eyes? I do, sometimes. I wonder what I look like in my mother's*

*eyes, my Grandmother's, and my friends'.*

*To be truthful, I wonder a lot. Mostly about what I look like in your dark eyes.*

*I just hope that someday I'll be able to get a hint.*

*Okay?*

I just can't bring myself to click send.

☆

# PART 2

[image]

☆Deathbringer☆

*"He stepped down,*
*trying not to look at her,*
*as if she were the sun, yet*
*he saw her like the sun,*
*even without looking"*

-<Anna Karenina>, Leo Tolstoy

☆

# [20] Murder

[image]

**Disclaimer: I don't know anything about assassination, and nothing in the chapters are based on real life attempts. The future chapters mention murder/ blood.**

☆Deathbringer☆

*"Maybe, if he can kill Vengeance or Slaughter." Her lips, shining, a shade of brilliant red, glowing in the darkness. From wine of blood, nobody knows. Perhaps both. That would make even more sense. "Then I'll let him go with you."*

*Muffled voices, hoarse whispers from Mother. "Please, he's only a boy. You told he you had-- you had a daughter his age. Please, please...You helped me break ties with them, holding him like this is just cruel...Battlewinner..."*

*"And I would have let you, if he didn't exist. But he does! And that boy has a talent nobody can deny-- a talent for killing. I wouldn't be surprised if he was listening to our conversation just now. It will be a shame to let his talent to go waste, and that's all I'm asking for, it's very simple! A successful mission."*

*"Murder! From Deathbringer!" Mother is sobbing. "No.. Let me do it-- please."*

*Everything is puzzling with Mother. She would cry at Battlewinner's feet at one second and stab her with a dagger in another. She play with people's emotions, so much that it is hard to know if what she says is real and what is not.*

*Battlewinner's voice is cold in return. "Do you think I have time to hear you play weak? You were one of my best agents, and I'm very disappointed in you. The boy is all I want. If he cannot perform a single murder, I will place a bullet through his head myself. If he can, I will let him go with you to kill the man. And then both of you will be free from*

*us."*

*He silently slips away.*

*Vengeance and Slaughter. His two roommates-- it hasn't been long since he realized Slaughter would be easier to kill. Slaughter is a heavy sleeper, and he's weaker than Vengeance, wouldn't have the quick wits to strike back if he does wake up. Surrounded by darkness, he silently walks away from the door and to his room.*

*He finds Slaughter awake, Morrowseer by his side.*

*Damn you, he thinks as he hides the pocketknife behind him. He can tell from Slaughter's expression that he has been warned. Morrowseer gives him a dry smile-- an expression that he hates-- and hisses, "Here comes the assassin."*

*Vengeance is awake as well, sitting on the upper bunk, his eyes narrowed. "Deathbringer, what is this about?"*

*Convince them. His voice is smooth, and he's talking over his racing heart with charming words. "What are you guys awake for? I went to get a drink from the kitchen."*

*Slaughter sneers. "Morrowseer tells me you plan to kill me. Because you-- you have to kill one of us if you want to go with your mom."*

*Morrowseer ruining everything. He looks at Deathbringer with lazy eyes, a look that expects him to convince Slaughter otherwise. "Is it true?"*

*Great. Three to one, although nobody knew if Morrowseer would join the fight. Nobody knew anything about stupid Morrowseer.*

*"Yeah, it's true. But I'm not going to do it," he says smoothly, looking at Slaughter straight in the eye. He may be able to convince him to get his guard down, and make more time for himself. "I don't know what Morrowseer has told you, but I'm not going to kill you."*

*Slaughter's stupid sneer again. It won't come off. "Yeah, like that's true."*

*He sighs, like he is explaining something to a five-year-old. He can't convince Slaughter-- that much is clear-- that he thinks of him as a*

*friend, because all of them know that every one of them would stab each other to death if it means one compliment from Battlewinner. "Think about it logically. If I killed you, I would have to go with that stupid woman that I have to call mother. Why should I? I'll be able to work as an assassin for the rest of my life. Everyone knows I'm the best in this group, so why should I leave?"*

*Slaughter is not convinced. "Shut up. Anyone would give anything to leave this place. Maybe you'll even do it out of spite, or because Battlewinner might compliment you."*

*A plan starts rolling in his brain-- he may take the thick book on the desk and throw it on Vengeance's face while he slits Slaughter's throat. Vengeance may try to stab him from the upper bunk, but it would be too hard for him. Vengeance also may throw a blanket to blind him, but Deathbringer could use that to blind Slaughter instead. And if Vengeance ever comes down, he would grab him and throw him to the ground. He may also possibly injure Morrowseer with the knife if he tries to make any movements that suggests he would help.*

*But maybe Vengeance won't attack at all, because he only has to kill one of them, and by then he would have made his point clear. If Slaughter dies smoothly, he will never have to attack him in the first place. Vengeance probably knows this.*

*"Maybe I will," he hisses, playing on Slaughter's cowardliness. He can see Slaughter gripping his pocketknife, his hands shaking. He can take advantage of that. "Perhaps I'll throw this knife and put it through your brain. You know I can. And you probably couldn't even defend it."*

*"I'm tired of you acting like the best one here," Slaughter says lowly, but he starts shaking even harder. "And you getting pleased when she compliments you for being a good murderer, like that's something to be proud--"*

*There was no point trying to persuade a soon to be dead boy, so he interrupts. "Vengeance, are you joining the fight?" Slaughter's eyes starts to widen, and he tilts his head slightly to look at Vengeance for support. Vengeance shakes his head lightly, and Slaughter cries put, "TRAITOR!"*

*That is when he throws the book at Slaughter's knees, making him fall,*

*and grabs the blanket from the bed and throw it over Morrowseer's eyes. He doesn't even move. Slaughter's trembling too hard, gasping. His knife is out of his reach. Deathbringer still has his in his hands-- if Vengeance moves, he would use it on him first. But Vengeance is watching without a word.*

*Cruel assassins they are. Watching their friends die without even moving a muscle. Vengeance only stares from his upper bunk like God, watching the devils kill off one another. And Slaughter happens to be the weaker devil.*

*"Death-bring-er," Slaughter is breathing out his name is syllables as he trembles. He's gripping the ground with one hand and covering his mouth with another. "Please don't kill me, I have a mother, a sister, they depend on me--" He looks up, his eyes full of dispair and fear. He reaches out and grabs Deathbringer's leg, like that would bring mercy from him. The fool. That's when Deathbringer realizes that yes, they are only boys after all. Boys of ten, killing each other, soaking the carpet with each others' blood. Slaughter, with his dark eyes, even look like him, or one of his classmates that he played with, a few hours ago at the ocean. His dark green eyes even remind him of her, of Glory. He saved her today at the ocean, when she was drowning. He even thought that her eyes, looking at him with a new light, was pretty. Or perhaps everything seemed prettier because he had saved a life.*

*And now, at the very same day, a boy he knows is begging him for life.*

*He slits his throat.*

☆

Mother works hard everyday to never get us back to the life of assassination. When she comes home, she almost always never has more than a few words to speak to me because she's so tired. Her hands are wrinkled and cold from washing too many dishes, her back aching because she has to carry too many things at her work.

She doesn't trust me to cook in the kitchen in fear that I'll poison her, and she doesn't allow me to touch the knives, either. She doesn't really trust anyone. But mostly me.

*A true assassin knows when to enjoy themselves and when to get to work. That is why your mother is not one of us and never will be. She has seen too many things and she was not strong enough. She was better off not seeing the things she did*. Battlewinner had once said that about Mother. Maybe she was right. The only thing she's happy about nowadays is that we managed to cut our ties with the assassination group completely.

Little does she know, Morrowseer works at my school as a boxing teacher.

I guess I never considered that one could ever cut ties with them-- assassins-- completely, even if they moved to a different country. So I never talked to him about anything other than boxing. I never knew why he was there, and I also knew that it couldn't be a coincidence. That he was trying to do something.

The little assassination group Battlewinner ran got caught when I was in eighth grade. It was on the news for quite some while-- she got caught while trying to kill one of the government officials, and so did her houses containing the small boys and girls that were training to be her servants. The files that she kept were all burned before the police could get access to them, saving me and my mother. And, apparently, Morrowseer.

People were always something covered for me-- I never knew what they wanted. Before I moved from Minnesota-- to the hands of Battlewinner, away from Mother-- I failed at everything. I was heavy for my age, and I cried a lot. I got punished a lot of times because I lied too much and got caught because I didn't know how to cover my clumsy tracks.

When I was younger-- in first or second grade-- I genuinely liked people, and some-- not many-- of them genuinely liked me. That was before I moved from Minnesota and met Battlewinner, and everything changed.

From then, I always succeed in life-- had a group of friends, girls that liked me, slightly bad grades because I learned about killing people at nights until seventh grade ended. Manipulation. I learned it from Battlewinner herself, learned how to lie and never get

caught, how to smile so I can win the teachers and classmates over. I also saw many horrible things-- the ways to murder, to lie without anyone knowing, to steal.

Nobody knew that my charming words were always planned so they can give me some reward, and that I had learned them with my training. I had seen too many things at a young age, which made me manipulative and charming. It was just the things I held on to survive, something that made people like and trust me. It made them easier to use.

But maybe I genuinely liked my classmates until we got to middle school, where everyone changed. They liked to sing and smile and braid their hair and play soccer. They had small interests and no idea of what awaited them in life. They were like little beings with innocent souls that I had to protect, to cover their eyes so they wouldn't see the things I saw at night with Battlewinner.

And then there was Glory.

She was strong and silent and deadly, and she was a person that didn't come to me for my charm when everyone else did. She reminded me of Quickstrike-- so passionate, so hurt, so longing for something that I couldn't fathom. She was lonely, and so I was I. She was bitter, and she knew things about the world that I knew-- and nobody else did, not the people around us. That was what made me stare at her when she rested under the tree in elementary school. Which led her to ask me why I was staring at her, which also led us to become friends.

Glory needed more protection than others, and yet she was stronger in some ways that I didn't know. While she got hurt easily physically, and needed more attention, she was strong. Although she had gone through a lot of hurtful things, which made her bitter, she had no dark wishes or thoughts.

When I was being trained to kill, she was learning how to stay alive. Not from people, but from disease. I guess we drew each other close because we were so different. I protected her from things I hated, things that I belonged in, and she showed me a lot of things, made me learn. We understood each other and yet we were so different.

She wouldn't trust anyone easily, so none of my charm worked on her. She seemed that she could see through my manipulation, so she was the one person, along with Mother, that I treated genuinely. She was a breath of fresh air.

At first, though, she wasn't different from any of them-- the smiling girls that secretly begged other people for attention. Most of them I befriended when I got older because they only saw my charm, were only interested in it alone. They were frail and easy to break-- I always had to talk to them first and smile at them to become friends. The times when they confessed greater feelings for me were simply an inconvenience, an annoyance that I tried to avoid.

I guess I was never aware of other people's feelings. Maybe it was an outcome of my training, one of the side affects. It was something I learned, respect for others' feelings, not what I was born with. I had to experience it in their positions to understand them and to treat them with more kindness and mercy.

The person that made me learn all of those things were Glory.

From the day I met her, I always wished before I fell asleep that I will never have to murder the one thing I held important-- my friendship with her. Because, looking back, it might have been the one thing that had been keeping me sane, although I didn't know it then.

The manipulation I had learned, the fake charm, the bitterness and hate, was enough to ruin a boy. I always tried to tell myself that I was protecting Glory from harm, when, in the end, she was the one keeping me alive.

# [21] Past

[image] [image]

☆Deathbringer☆

*Whispers. Dark rooms, hands gripping on his arms and chest, never letting him go. Faint red lips in the unending darkness, hissing , always hissing. Foul and sickly sweet at the same time. Faint brown locks, a woman laughing in his ear maniacally. Tears are falling from his face, and he is spitting out unintelligible words, begging them to stop. He's puking on the floor, gripping anything that will stop them.*

*Dirty. He is dirty. His soul and his body and mind and everything about him is-- dirty. They have taken everything from him, has laughed at his pain, enjoyed his screams. He wants to destroy them all, to hit them, to do anything other than this-- this powerless hopelessness.*

*"STOP!" He's screaming. The women laugh as they toy with his hair. It comes to a point that he's too tired to scream. He lies there, silent, empty. Everything about him is dirty and disgusting. And he wants to destroy them.*

*They don't stop, they never stop, their hands are all over his body, the voices in his ear, whispering things that he doesn't want to listen to--*

*"Wake up, boy." A low voice. A hand jerks him up, and his eyes jolt open. He is laying down on a bed. He almost gives out a sigh of relief, only to find another woman standing over him. Her lips are red, and that wakes his nightmare again. He's suddenly screaming, trying to push her away, only to have her clutch his hands with long, pale fingers. His heart is beating fast, and he's trembling all over.*

*"I won't try to touch you like they did," she says. Her eyes are icy blue. He cannot trust anyone-- her eyes are flashing with cold hunger, although it doesn't quite match the expressions the people had before. "It's Battlewinner. Don't be afraid, I won't hurt you."*

*He can't even talk, he's trembling too hard. Yes, Battlewinner, the*

*woman he saw before he got plunged into this endless darkness. The one his father handed him to. He remembers the training he got before all of this-- the guns, the knives, the children with empty stares. The meager food, the stealing, the whipping. It was only a few months ago. He had perfected shooting a gun, and his teacher was congratulating him. He thought everything was over, but then he was sent to his place. This horrible place."You-- my father betrayed us. T-told us we would be safe. Took me a-away from mother."*

*"Yes, your father is dreadful, I agree." Battlewinner leans close to him, which makes him start struggling, trying to get her fingers off him, but her grip is too strong. "That's why I killed him. What do you think? Do you like me now?"*

*Father. The tall man that promised him a new future where Mother wouldn't have to play with guns for a living. The man that laughed when he screamed to save him. The man that handed Deathbringer to the women. He has been killed?*

*Maybe he deserves to.*

*"Killing makes everything better, don't you think?" She lets him go, but he isn't struggling anymore. He's leaning close, too, like they really are sharing a secret. "You're special, you know, Deathbringer. I didn't even know you were being sent here, in all this mess. You were one of my best students, and I'm a friend of your mother's. I can lead you to her."*

*"G-get out of here?" He clenches his hands into a fist. Yes. Anything to get to Mother again.*

*"Yes." Battlewinner's eyes flash. Like they're expecting something. "Do you want to do anything to this place? Destroy anything?"*

*...Destroy?*

*Destroy what? The people? The white rooms? The women that laughed while he was screaming? The beds?*

*Yes. Destroy everything.*

*He looks at Battlewinner, and realizes that she, too, looks at him as if looking at a child. A powerless child that can't do anything. Some pitiful*

*boy that needs her help. When he speaks again, he decides that he won't stutter. His anger will calm his racing heart into cold, forceful thumping. "Where is my mother? Is she safe?"*

*Did his mother go through the things he did? He will never forgive them if she had. He would choke their necks with his own fingers. Battlewinner stares at him, surprised. "She's safe, child. She'll need you to protect her in the future."*

*He is frowning. Yes, protecting his mother in the future. He will protect her from anything. He will grow strong, and he will protect both of them. He will murder to keep Quickstrike safe. Murder and steal and lie. He will protect her, don't let her go through this, never see her in pain again. He will protect her from the man he used to call Father. The hateful insects that roamed this world.*

*His frown slowly turns into a smile, and he bursts out laughing. Laughing at this cruel world, the world that has turned its back on him. It's like he has lifted a veil, only to find his Wonderland spoiled-- it is filled with horrible ashes and parasites. But he will go through them, for his mother, for Quickstrike. His laugh fills the room until Battlewinner is staring at him in disbelief.*

*"Is something funny, boy?" She really seems surprised. The expression on her face is priceless. He wonders if anybody would ever understand how he is feeling in this moment-- how betrayed, how horrified.*

*He thinks back to the word Battlewinner talked about. D estroy? Yes. Destroy everything, absolutely everything. The entire building, the people, the insects that roam freely even after doing that to him. Destroy anything and everything, as long as it leads to Mother again. It doesn't matter. Only Mother matters. Only the people close to him he will protect. Nothing else mattered.*

*"What do you want, my boy? What do you want to destroy?" She gives him a sharp grin, and they are grinning at each other, laughing at each other's bloodthirstiness. At each other's pain, at each others passion. And they somehow match. "We can just go, or we can...do some things while we're still here. A little, sweet revenge won't do any harm."*

*That one choice that changed his life. He would think many years later*

*what would have happened if he had just left. If he hadn't killed anyone. But that day, he chose to kill.*

*"Kill them all," he is whispering. Battlewinner's eyes start flashing, and he hands him something big and heavy. Her eyes whisper, I have found you.*

*Yes. You have found me. His hands close over the black weapon.*

*A gun.*

*"They are outside this room." A sweet secret, a passionate secret, something so beautiful and horrible that it is shining like the sun. "My guards are here. We will help you kill them. We will burn this place to the ground."*

*That one sentence. It started everything. As they tossed the flame to the building-- a building that was dripping with blood, with only dead people in it-- he could feel his own life setting on fire. In a way, he was burning everything about him into dark, dark ashes.*

*Yes. The fire started everything.*

☆

The first time I saw Greatness, it was beside her mother, Battlewinner. She was a small girl, with big black eyes and black choppy hair. Even then, it was short. Her father was never there, but seeing her Asian features that got clearer as she got older, her father probably was an Asian. We never mixed words, but I could tell that she took an interest in me. It wasn't a positive one-- it was hostile and filled with disgust. I was used to it, along the nicknames that Slaughter and Vengeance gave me-- Battlewinner's puppy, mama's boy, shy weirdo. She never came to train with us, and only watched us from afar.

The second time I saw Greatness, it was in eighth grade. I almost couldn't believe my eyes. She told me later that her new friends-- she had moved a few days before-- had told her that I wasn't really interested in girls, that I only meant trouble. But she came up to me, giving me a sharp grin-- so similar to Battlewinner's-- that I

knew it had to be her.

"I heard your name was Deathbringer?" I was watching her with disbelief, and she was smiling. "I recently moved to this school. Nice to meet you. Would you like to give me your phone number?"

I gave her my number. I knew it wasn't something like her friends imagined-- it was something that I had to give. Her eyes alone were threatening to uncover my secrets. I learned later that it was also that year that her mother was sent to jail for running an assassination group and for many murders. She received death penalty.

"I betrayed her," Greatness said simply when I asked her for the first time. "Nobody could guess that it's me, because I put quite a show when she was called in. I called the police and only left some like Vengeance so the superiors in the assassination groups wouldn't suspect me. Besides, the people in power promised to protect me, and they can't betray me, either, because I know some of their secrets, too. Honestly, only Battlewinner knows. I even watched her get electrocuted."

As someone that always put my mother first, it was something that I simply couldn't comprehend. "But why? She's...your mother."

Greatness had looked at me strangely. "She was killing people. It was the right thing to do."

The right thing to do. It was something that almost made me laugh. But maybe that was what made her scarier than her mother ever was, in a way. She was willing to do anything to put the people that had done wrong in their place. She didn't care if it backfired at her. She was obsessed. "Since when did people like us care about that?"

We didn't know each other much back then, and I probably will never forget the look Greatness gave me then. The look filled with grief and disgust. An expression that said, *you're too far gone to ever understand morality.* And maybe I was.

"I'm not one of you," she replied coldly. "I never killed a person in my life, and I feel pride in that fact. I never allowed my mother to

put me in training. I watched all of your souls die and become killer machines. My mother shot my father herself when he threatened to tell the authorities what she had done if she recruited more children. She never stopped, she was obsessed with it. And apparently, you were her best work. That is why I came to see you, to see if you had killed more people. Interesting choice of people you chose to kill. You see, I got rid of the files myself. I burned them all up because I knew they would be wrongly used even it placed into the right hands, but I looked at them. And frankly, I was very surprised when I saw you walked by your best friend."

She knew who I had killed before we even got to know each other. That was when I realized, I had to keep her by my side. Manipulation was always my weapon. I had to keep her away from Mother. I considered killing her, but it would have been too complicated-- she had said that she had connections with the authorities, and most people knew not to mess with them. "You shouldn't speak to trained assassins that way. You don't have your mother anymore to hide behind, do you?"

Sharp words. They always came first when somebody talked about me and Glory. People usually fought back with even more savagery, but not Greatness. She was a shadow longing for the light, for innocence. Her entire existence was based on the light. But, even she was a shadow, no matter what she said. She had seen the things we did, what humans were capable of doing.

That was when she gave me one of her smiles. Her sharp grin that just reminded me of Battlewinner. The difference, though, was that Battlewinner smiled when her blood-thirst was satisfied. Greatness, though, enjoyed putting people out of the way. Not by killing. Secrets and law was her weapons, and she played them well. "I know your secret, Deathbringer. You should word your words more carefully."

Greatness, Greatness. I kept her by my side, trying to keep her away from Glory. I was too scared to get my secret found. Too determined to make Greatness fall in love with me so she wouldn't go blabbering my secrets to anyone she trusted. First, I needed her to care for me. It was like a game of chess, sweating over her moves, determined to get rid of her king so I could move on to the

next round.

Who would have thought that we, one cruel assassin and one cold-blooded traitor, would be trapped in the longest cliche of all time and fall in love with each other?

# [22] Manipulation

[image]

☆Deathbringer☆

It might a little too fast, but I want to start on my first kiss with Greatness. Before that first kiss, I never viewed her someone that I liked. She was a person I forcibly pleased because she knew my secrets. Or maybe I used that as an excuse. I don't really know.

Greatness, the Destroyer's daughter, happened to have a very sweet tooth. Since she lived alone, she came to my house when she was bored. And because she held me in her hands-- my secret on the tip of her tongue, always ready to be said-- I could never make her turn back.

She liked dark chocolate-- she always had one in her hand, no matter what situation she was in-- whether she was threatening someone, or laughing at a joke. It differed everyday. Greatness came whenever she pleased, so I couldn't help but distance Glory. Greatness also knew this, and maybe she held onto it as one of her valuable pieces. But she had enough sense to sneak away whenever my mother came to the house. Maybe she knew that Mother would freak out by just looking at her. Sometimes she came by wearing a wig and heavy makeup to disguise herself. She really was good at it-- sometimes I couldn't even identify her when she rang the doorbell.

She was probably lonely a lot. No matter what she said, she had nobody. Her mother, no matter how bloodthirsty, had died. Most of her friends were new, and a lot of people were trying to track her down to kill her. She was living in a lonely apartment by herself. I saw how she looked at Mother-- how they filled with longing for something she couldn't have. It was almost identical to the one Glory had when she looked at me and Mother. So I let her stay.

"You should invite Glory over," she said in summer break, looking pointedly at my hands, which were gripping the phone. I did want

to call her. Greatness was handing me a black plastic bag filled with chocolate ice-cream, taking one for herself. "You like her, don't you? It's written all over your face."

"We only view each other as friends," I replied shortly. "And if you did want me to hold on to my relationship with Glory, you shouldn't come so much. You know why I don't invite her."

She was brushing her short black hair, her eyes searching my face. "I actually don't know. Is it because of--the assassination? Does she even know?"

I chose my words carefully, trying to make myself sound pitiful. "Of course not." I looked at my ice cream. Was she just asking because she wanted information to use against me? Would it be wise to tell her? But she probably knew, the things I did. "Do you think I would be able to face her if she knew everything I did? She would look at me as a monster, like everyone else."

Maybe that was one of the reasons I liked Greatness so much. Because I could tell her things I didn't tell anyone else. The things I thought I had to take to my grave. And now I was spilling the secrets, telling myself that it was just so I could win her heart. Romantic or platonic. It didn't matter. I really was a piece of shit, thinking that the only thing that mattered about us was that she had my secrets. Looking back, maybe I didn't even know her.

I was always the trashy part in a relationship, to be truthful. My father had always been the abusive one. He never abused Mother physically-- to be truthful, he would have gotten beaten himself if he had tried-- but he always stayed in contact with her. No matter what Mother said, she had loved him. She had loved him with everything she had, and she abandoned everything when she got pregnant with me. Even after he left us, he still contacted Mother and sent her money. I wish he hadn't done that, because it gave him an excuse to have a control over our lives until he betrayed us to Battlewinner. He had never loved her and it was clear, but he stayed around to keep hurting her because he enjoyed her pain. He rejected her countless times, gave her a little encouragement, and squished down her feelings all over again. Even for me-- a six year old kid-- it was sickening to see.

That was why I always made sure to draw the line clear. If a girl confessed, it was merely an inconvenience. But I knew that staying friends with them would only hurt them, remind them of what could have been, so I abandoned them entirely. That was the way I was raised to think. Most times, it ended up hurting them even more.

That day, Greatness confessed everything about herself. Which wouldn't be a wise move if it wasn't me, but that day it also happened to be me. And if it happened to be any other girl with her secrets, I would have drawn the line again. But it was Greatness. "You know, I was seven when Battlewinner killed my dad. I can't remember much, except the fact that he was really nice. We used to have long trips around different countries, just him and me. And Battlewinner stayed home, recruiting her children, making them killer machines. I look back and think that maybe she had a reason for it. Why would she mess up so many lives, though? She probably took pleasure in killing, thought what she was doing was right. She wouldn't send assassins on most missions if the ones killed weren't bad people. Mostly. Unless they offered her a lot of money. And, of course, she usually raised her gun first, instead of trying to solve things with words. Maybe that's what happened between her and Dad. I never even listened to why she had me. It was probably an accident while on a mission."

The part where she poured out her secrets. I was a step closer. I probably had a hungry look in my eyes, but my voice was firmly contained. "Battlewinner was a hard woman to understand. But she must have had some adoration for you, if you never killed anyone. You shouldn't hate her too much." But then, who was I to say such a thing? I had burned buildings down alongside her. It was actually a wonder Greatness hadn't turned me in. Which made me think, did she want to turn me in? Was all of this an act? Was she recording my words to turn in to the police?

Greatness smiled, looking at her melting ice cream, and it was filled with a loneliness that I couldn't possibly understand. "I ask myself a lot why I ever turned her in. You know, she was kind sometimes. Yeah, she insisted on me having a little training, but when I told her I didn't want to kill, she didn't force me. She always taunted me, but

she never got rid of me, either. She used to cut my hair herself. I actually looked up to her sometimes, before she killed my father. They were actually arguing because Dad had told me things she had done, and suddenly he was threatening to call the authorities. Battlewinner got upset, making some excuse about how it was going to hurt me in the future and how she wanted what was the best for the family-- like she deserved to call us her 'family'-- and she believed that she needed those assassins." Tears. The famous Greatness, the traitor, the real Destroyer behind everything, the mastermind, was shedding tears.

It was pathetic.

Weakling. She was weak and she had my secrets. Now, they were safe. Because she was opening her heart, pouring everything out. That was all I could think.

"And she really did horrible things, Deathbringer. It's-- almost impossible to put into words. And I was crying in the closet and after a few hours, she opens the door and her hands are full of blood. My father's blood. I--I sometimes see her face, with the red drops on her cheek, in my-- my--"

Only if she knew that I was of the same kind with her mother. Battlewinner and I understood each other, understood why we killed. Greatness couldn't possibly understand, that we both did it because the world was too cruel to us. That we eliminated everyone in the way, even our own relatives. In the end, Battlewinner had gotten too bloodthirsty, too caught up in what she had done. And the person she protected with everything she had was the one that betrayed her. I would not make the same mistake. "You don't have to go on, if you don't want to." The magic words that made everyone go on. Greatness was trusting me. I had done it. My secret was safe. She had slipped from her guard, had moved her piece knowing I would be able to hold it against her. I was so close to checkmate, and she was trusting me to make the wrong move for some reason-- that I liked her too?

Pfft.

Sometimes I do get surprised by my own cruelty, in my own

manipulation. So cunning and devious that I sometimes get caught inside it, too. Yes, maybe I am too cruel, too cold-blooded. Thinking everything as a game, not something that involves real human beings. The truth is, though, I have long given up trying to ask how much human life is worth. Murder after murder, it has come to a point that it is simply an inconvenience. I know it sounds horrible, but it is the way I am. The way I was born to be shaped.

Maybe, if I hadn't burned that building down, killed the women that had done horrible things to me, I would still have some innocence left. But no. I did kill them and burn the building down. And I still have Mother that I can still protect.

"I know why you kill," Greatness suddenly said. Her hands were clenched into a fist. "You kill for your mother, to protect her. You hold her higher than anything else. You protect her with your life, with your soul. Of course I understand. And maybe Battlewinner did too, hold her assassination group more important than anything else. Except some things are more honorable than others, Deathbringer. The day I saw Battlewinner executed...she was screaming at me the whole time. Reaching out as if she could kill me. And she seemed like she would. And then after a few minutes, her life was gone, and there was nothing except a shell of what she had been. Then I asked myself, what was all this for? What did I hold the highest? My dead father? The assassination group I betrayed?"

Silence.

"That was when I realized that the thing I held most important was the world. Not any particular person, but everyone. The children living in the streets because they have no home. The people that are killed everyday without a reason. The people that do those murders. I want to help them. That is why I don't regret being a traitor to even my own blood. Because she was making the world a worse place-- she was killing people. And worse, she was making everyone else killers. Watching children of my age turn soulless, it was horrible to watch. And I was determined to do something about it. That was why I did what I did, and that is why I believe in justice when nobody around me does."

The world. The thing Greatness held most important was the world.

It was like watching a child. Trying to give a great speech to amaze people when she didn't know a thing. What was it that she had gone through? Nothing. Nothing compared to the things I had done for her mother, whom she killed.

But maybe I was also a little amazed. There was a person in the world that actually cared about the place that they were living. The people that they lived with. A world that had not yet turned its back on her. Someone who believed in humanity. I didn't know that such people really existed.

I had held onto cruelty, to manipulation, for so long that I had forgotten what kindness even was. And here, Greatness was reminding me again. Even if I did view it as childish and fake.

"The point is, Deathbringer, you can still go back. You can-- do things to make up for what you did. You had your reasons, but maybe it's time to move on. The world isn't-- isn't all bad. God, this sounds cheesy, but I mean it. Don't be so afraid. People will accept you for who you are. Most of them won't, but some people will. There are kind people, people that fight for a better world. And to them, you just have to find the courage to lift up your mask and show them your true face."

Soon, I was smiling. I desperately wanted to laugh- was it that? The thing I was so scared of? Letting people look at my real face, the cruelty underneath? Too afraid to apologize, too selfish to ruin the fake sandcastle that I had created? It was time to start over, and Greatness was showing me how.

I didn't see it then, though.

"I think that can also apply to you, you know." What should I do? Cry with her? What would he the most suitable?

The thing was, Greatness was a girl. Presumably attracted to the opposite gender. Trust came before love. And I needed to steer the wheel to the best direction, a direction where my secret would be completely safe.

A kiss.

And then my hands were on her face, and we were leaning towards each other. I had done it many times before, with countless girls. But this was an act of promise. A step towards something better.

I think that was when I realized that, by making the wrong move, she had lured me in. Maybe she had lured herself in, too. And by kissing her, I had sealed the contract.

☆

**Please don't write comments like, "GREATNESS YOU WITCH, I HATE YOU" or stuff like that ;-; I know this is a Glorybringer story , but please don't hate a side character just because they happen to love one of the main ones (I'm not saying everyone does just that a lot of people tend to do it , speaking from experience lolol). Please bear with me guys !!**

# [23] Relationship

[image]

☆Deathbringer☆

If there was one thing that set Greatness from others, it was this.

When I got a new girlfriend, I always told Glory first. At first, it was a big deal. She teased me around in elementary school, whistled when I was with my girlfriend, and laughed when I told her about my first kiss. In middle school, she just listened when I ran on. I think I did it because I was lonely, and Glory was kind enough to listen to me. It wasn't like I ever took them out on dates-- with school in the morning and weekly assassination training at night, I simply didn't have any spare time. And if I had any, I spent them with Glory.

Yeah, I was total trash when it came to dating.

The day after I my first kiss with Greatness, I finally mustered the courage to tell Glory. We hadn't talked for a long time, so we met at her house for a sleepover. We were talking about getting ready for high school. After watching a movie, we started to talk about it more.

And then I told her about Greatness. I was surprised myself- I sounded so genuine. Like I did mean it. I could tell Glory was a little surprised, too.

And then I thought about what Greatness told me- about starting over. Telling Glory my secrets to see if she accepted them.

But how could I? The Deathbringer she knew wasn't me. If I took that mask off, what would our friendship be? It would be something like talking to a whole different person. Letting Glory know how I killed mercilessly, how I had blood on my hands- never.

So I went on and on about Greatness. Maybe I sounded obssessed to

her, but the truth was, I didn't want her to think that I was simply hiding the truth. So I kept covering it with long descriptions about Greatness. How she liked dark chocolate, how we talked about some things while eating chocolate ice cream and how we confessed.

Glory's reaction was a little different that day- she was listening carefully, dropping small nods here and there, a frown on her face. That made me more scared, so I kept going, even making stuff up. I couldn't stop, because I had tried the method to get Glory uninterested, but she was interested more than ever.

Did I drop a hint about who I really was? Why was she staring at me so strangely? Did my mask come off? My heart started thumping too loudly and I had to stop. And Glory kept staring at me without a word. And she kept stsring until her grandmother came to turn the lights out.

We usually talked until late at sleepovers. But this time, neither of us said a word.

The next day, I invited Greatness to our lunch table.

☆

It might have started as a means to keep Greatness' mouth shut, but I think it did get bigger until I kind of recognized it as love. I don't know what made her so special, but maybe it was the fact that I didn't have to act around her. She knew what I had done, and yet she stayed by my side. She was a breath of fresh air.

Greatness was always the leading one in the relationship. She bought me frozen yogurt whenever we rode home in Greatness' car. When I called, she always came to my house, even when she was busy. I tried to mimick her, but it wasn't as good as what she tried to do for me.

She was always very careful with me, careful when we held hands, when we hugged. And her eyes were so vulnerable that I almost couldn't believe what I was seeing. There was an eager look on her face when she stared at me, somehow expectant and encouraging.

I didn't know why she gave me those looks.

I talked to Glory at school like I always did, but Greatness didn't mind. She just watched me carefully, like she wanted a reaction out of me. It was the first time a girlfriend ever looked at me that way, and it always puzzled me.

We even held hands in school, and it was funny how people reacted. Only if they knew what had brought us together- they wouldn't be able to even imagine.

Greatness always came to my house, and never allowed me in hers. And even though we were supposed to be in love, I never allowed her in my room. It was a relationship where we were both falling in love with each other, but was prepared to be betrayed anytime. Maybe that was what really brought us apart. Trust and vulnerability, because neither of us had been in a "real" relationship before.

"I'm going to join the UN when I get older," she said once, her hair tied back with a lot of locks loose. She was leaning on my shoulder. "What do you plan on doing?"

The future. I had never dreamed so far. "I mean. Go to a college thst accepts me, and maybe I can join the army or something."

It clearly wasn't an answer she wanted. "Maybe you can become a bodyguard. That would suit you."

"Yeah, why not become a sandbag so I can get shot myself when assassins come along. I value my life more than I value famous people's lives."

Greatness snorted. A silence followed, and then she started whispering lowly. "Do you ever plan on turning yourself in?"

Fear was the first thing I felt. *Traitor.* She was a traitor that had turned against her own blood. Why wouldn't she turn me in?

But no, she loved me. She would do what was best for me. Love was so hard to bargain with- there was no saying what she would do. Who did she love more, me or the world?

My assassin instincts always flew out first, and I told myself to think it over- I loved Greatness. I could take her thoughts into consideration- after all, going to jail could help me. Maybe.

"Would you like me to?"

Greatness narrowed her eyes as I placed my arm around her shoulder. "How many have you killed?"

How many? The women and the other people that were in buildings. At least five. Slaughter. The man I shot in the head when he was driving with his daughter.

"I might get death penalty if I did turn myself in. It would certainly make sense." I couldn't tell her. After all, she didn't know how many I had killed- did she?

My love for Greatness was big, but not big enough to erase my instincts completely. I couldn't bring myself to trust her. After all, she had been involved with the assassins.

She started giving me the sharp grin. "You don't trust me, do you?"

Well, shit.

"I love you," I said quite truthfully. She laughed and pinched my cheek. "Besides, it's not like you trust me, either. Our relationship isn't built on trust, is it?"

"That's true." Greatness seemed disappointed, though. And maybe so was I, because she never denied the fact that she didn't trust me. "You can love someone and never trust them. Well, you made a good choice. You should never trust me, just like I will never trust you."

No, Greatness. I should have trusted you. And you should have told me that you trusted me, because you did. Then maybe it would have ended better for the both of us.

☆

Nightmares always struck when I was alone and Mother wasn't

there.

Sometimes, I was back in the white rooms. Or Slaughter was raising a knife over my head, getting ready to slit my throat. Or Glory, watching me as I shot the man in the head. And then she screamed at me. *Monster,* she cried out. *Don't come close to me. You are a disgusting beast, a horrible monster.*

I really was a monster.

I would wake up, soaked in sweat, and turn on all the lights, for once not caring about he electric bills. I would wander around the house holding a gun, which I hid underneath my pillow. Sometimes I would start choking randomly, my heart beating too hard. Even when I found nothing, I kept thinking that Slaughter was there, ready to raise a knife and slit my throat. Those nights I didn't sleep on the bed because it brought too much memories of the women.

And in those particular nights, I called Greatness. When she thought I was in too much of a bad position, she even came to my house because she knew they happened when Mother was not there. She would wrap me in blankets and we would just lay on the floor, me trembling and crying. She didn't touch me because she knew it would make it worse, but she instructed me to take deep breaths. When I did, she just whispered things over and over again until I calmed down.

"It's not happening again, Deathbringer. I know it feels real, but it's not happening again, I promise. They won't come here, I'll keep you safe."

When I calmed down, she asked if she could hug me, and when I said yes, we would just stay there hugging each other until the dawn came. Even when it was a school day, Greatness always dropped everything she was doing to help me. In a way, she was risking everything for me, loving me with everything she had.

And I threw it away.

☆

# [24] Breakup

☆Greatness☆

*"The one I kiss is the Destroyer. When I do it, come in and bind her fast," she whispered . The other workers had already been sent to the police office, and the kids were getting gathered into the car. The only person left was Battlewinner.*

*"Yes, Greatness." Her father's friend took her hand before she went in. "Be careful."*

*She went inside the room . Her mother was there, a cigarette on her red lips. Regret in her eyes. They really didn't mix at all.*

*"Greatness, I thought about this for a long time. Maybe we can move to Korea when this is all done. When the last assassin graduates, I want to focus on- us. Family."*

*Ha. Family. Like she hadn't killed her father a few months ago. But she had to play along, there were the officers outside . Officers that Father knew. Officers that obeyed the law, the ones that were honorable .*

*How vulnerable Battlewinner really was . Not even knowing that it was too late to say such things . If she hadn't killed her father- if he was still here- maybe she could forgive. But no. She could still imagine Battlewinner's hands , her father's blood soaking them, as she opened the closet door.*

*"That sounds great, Mother ." Mother . She spat that word out like a filthy insect. Battlewinner looked at her with a frown, and then shook her head.*

*"Forgive me, Greatness. I don't deserve to be called your mother, I know that. But you're the only thing I have left, with the assassination group. And when the assassination group is gone, we can focus on each other."*

*The signal. It was time . She went up to her, staring at her red lips, and*

*gently kissed her on the cheek, taking her gun away as she did so. That was when the officers came in and threatened to shoot. It was pathetic , how Battlewinner struggled for words, stared at her in disbelief. She could have killed Greatness right then , but she didn't.*

*Greatness leaned closer, lowering her voice so nobody else but they could hear.*

*"Rabbi."*

☆

I don't know how I felt about Deathbringer. But I do know two things. I was abusive and I didn't want him to leave my side.

I poured out everything to please him. When I told him my feelings the day we kissed, I didn't love him. I was simply curious of how he would react- would he pity me?- and then I saw his relieved eyes. In the end, I was only a person that he acted like he loved because I knew his secrets. Hoping that would keep my mouth shut. And it did.

I always viewed justice as something holy- something that needed to be kept. Maybe I got that from my father, who was a police officer. He was the very opposite of Battlewinner-bhe took pride in keeping the law safe, in catching the bad people. I have no idea how the two fell in love, but I could tell I wasn't just an accident, no matter what I told everyone. They did love each other. The only thing that made them fight was the fact that they had different beliefs.

Battlewinner believed that she had to eliminate the bad in order to make a gold place. It was also a bonus if she made money off it. So she bought children, made them broken, and offer them a hand as if she was their savior. Maybe she even believed she was.

The truth was, there were so many people like Deathringer. She recruited disgusting people- people that strangely liked to rape children, liked seeing them writhing and begging in pain- and asked them to do those very things. She even payed them to do it. When it was finished, she went up to the children and asked what they

wanted to destroy. If they said they didn't want to do anything, they were destroyed along with the criminals. If they said they wanted revenge, Battlewinner brought them to the training camp. Obviously, she didn't do them on their own- she sent other people to do her dirty work. The only thing that mattered to her was the outcome. The one boy that she had an interest in was Deathbringer, and she wouldn't stop complimenting him. I could read her eyes- *only if you were my son. Only if you had been born from my womb, instead of this horribly weak traitor.*

That's why I destroyed the files before turning them in. I wanted to see what kind of person he was- the traits that made him so great.

I could tell he didn't trust me, but that he was determined to make me care for him so I wouldn't go betray him.

The thing he didn't know, though, was that I could love him more than a person has ever loved a person and still turn him in. I worked that way. And sometimes I could understand Batrlewinner, despite all our differences. She cared for her assassination group, and I cared for justice. I was willing to lie and cheat for it.

But something kept me from turning him in, and that was determination to make him fall in love with him so I could break him.

It was a cruel goal I had in mind. I could tell he wanted to keep me by his side so I wouldn't go blabbering about his assassinations. In turn, I wanted him to love me so I could punish him for all the wrong deeds he had done. I felt disgusted by him, horrified that someone could perform murders and never fell any remorse while doing it. The more I spent time with him, the more convinced I got that he was a different version of Battlewinner.

Stupidly, I fell in love with him.

When I realized that I did, I changed my goal- I wanted him to see that there were good people that he could trust. He had no faith in the world, and that was what kept him from accepting what he had done was wrong. So I was determined to make him see that the good person was me. That I would accept him no matter what.

The more I tried to make him love me, the more I fell in love with him. It was ridiculous. I found that I liked his dark eyes, and that I kept trying to make up excuses for what he had done. A few months after we got into our relationship, I even began being jealous of Glory. And I kept looking at Deathbringer eagerly, wanting him to realize that he loved me, too. That I was the "good person" he had been missing in his life.

Did I trust him? Not really. He was a bubble that could burst at the slightest touch. I had seen how Battlewinner had killed the person she loved. Even when I loved him, I never trusted him. I thought about what he said in the day over and over again, wondering what he meant. Was he threatening me? Wanting to kill me?

I think that's why I never taught him where my house was. And why I slept with a gun under my mattress.

But I did care for him. That was for sure. I loved him more than I had loved anyone. He sometimes even reminded me of my father, although that was ridiculous.

The most painful thing was that he didn't love me.

When he called, I gave up everything to get to him. My heart wouldn't stop thumping until I saw him, turning on all the lights, pointing the gun at nothingness. And I was scared he would shoot me, but I went in anyway. And he never did. He would just start choking and screaming and crying.

That made me hate Battlewinner more. I never had the heart to tell him that the person that had caused everything was Battlewinner. That she was not his savior. That my mother was a horrible person, the one that had cut away his soul into pieces. I was too selfish to say it. Too afraid that he would leave me.

I think I was so messed up in my own vulnerability that I started being abusive to him. When he calmed down from his attacks, I found myself thinking over and over again, *yes, he needs me. Nobody else would ever understand why he gets those attacks. Nobody would want to stay by his side if they knew he killed so many people. I'm the right one for him.*

When he fell asleep again on the couch, my thoughts were shattered because he never whispered my name. He cried out *Glory* over and over again, sometimes whimpering, sometimes smiling.

That was the only name he ever said in his dreams.

After that, I found myself more abusive than before. I wouldn't stop hinting to him that she would never love him for who he really was. I acted like I was encouraging to step out of his shell, when in reality I was pushing him deeper into it. I looked at Glory's beautiful green eyes and my own, boring brown ones. Her shiny blonde hair and my raven black. She was beautiful and innocent and mature where I was ugly and dark and childish. And I slowly grew to hate her. I started holding hands with Deathbringer public, sometimes even kissing him. I knew she was hurt, but I told myself that she didn't even know pain. Here I was, giving my everything to Deathbringer, only to hear him cry a girl's name in his dreams. I became suspicious and horrible and abusive.

Looking back, I should have trusted him, and I should have trusted myself.

☆

Whenever we met- which wasn't too frequent, because his mother was home- he always had to go because Glory had called, asked for something. And I was always left behind, sitting on the bench holding two ice cream cones, or holding two movie tickets.

It came up to the point that I made him promise to not leave me until the day ended. He always left. One word from Glory, and he was gone.

How could I not know? I would have been stupid if I didn't realize that Deathbringer couldn't love anything else other than Glory. But I kept holding on, kept on being abusive, hinting that I was the only person that really accepted him. But did I, really?

He prioritized Glory over me, and I prioritized him over everything else. On top of that, I didn't trust him, and he didn't trust me. The only thing thst kept us together was a thin string of love, and when

we tried to balance our insecurities on that thing string, it broke. I just tried to hide those insecurities, trying to keep the string from breaking.

One day, on our way to get a waffle from Waffle House, our string finally snapped. We were getting our orders when Deathbringer got an urgent call. When I got the waffles and went into my car, he was calling Glory.

"Glory, where are you? Your grandma just called and she said you were missing-"

I snapped. Jealousy. "Deathbringer, who is it?"

Deathbringer shooed me away. "Glory-"

Jealousy and annoyance. "Can we have a date without you calling Glory in every second of it?"

He looked at me with disbelief. "Let me take one call, okay? Glory's grandmother is worried because of her. I'll take care of it quickly. Why are you so angry?"

Why am I so angry?

I don't know. Maybe because I drop everything when I'm with you, and you don't drop anything. Because you don't love me, you're only using my feelings to keep my mouth shut. So many things I want to say, and he kept calling.

"What's wrong, Glory?"

"Deathbringer, let's talk for a second," I snapped. Who gave a damn about those waffles. I got into the car. "So it's Glory, is it? Are you going away again? Do you even know how annoying it is, Deathbringer? You always leaving, expecting me to understand?"

"Woah. Greatness, hold on. I'll just finish one call and we can talk about it, okay?" Deathbringer's frown. I wanted to wipe it off.

"I was stupid to ever believe you can actually have feelings for me," I spat out, and Deathbringer finally hung up.

"What's wrong with you, Greatness? Glory's in a bad place and I need to help her. Why are you so angry all of a sudden?"

"How would you feel if we went on a date and I promised you I would stay with you until the end of the date, and go away EVERY TIME for a friend of mine? I get she might need help, but am I not important to you? Why do you always expect me to understand, and how much do I need to excuse you leaving all the time?"

Deathbringer sighed. "I'm sorry, but can we talk about this later? I need to call her."

"See?" Jealousy and annoyance and anger. God, tears were dripping down my face. "You call me at three o'clock in the morning and I come to your house because you're important to you. It doesn't matter if I'm sleeping, or if I'm cooking or doing whatever people do at 3 o'clock. I come to you, I comfort you, and I never ask you to stop calling me. And I like going to your house, okay? I like taking care of you. I know you're using me and lying that you love me just so I can keep my mouth shut and whatever, but-"

"I'm not, Greatness. Believe me, I do like you. You- it's you that doesn't trust me."

"Oh, and you trust me?" Tears. I wanted them to stop, but they keep flowing out like rain. "And then I think, would you come to my house at 3 o'clock if I called? You don't even care enough to stay for our dates, you always go when Glory calls you. Do you think I'm stupid?" I'm reached out and shook him. He didn't stop me.

My mouth was acting on its own, spitting out hurtful words that I had kept inside for months. "I get that you love her and that you've been using me. So stop playing around and say you want to stop whatever we're doing if you don't- view me as a lover. Because it's sickening, and it hurts. Do you understand me?"

Desthbringer looked at me, expressionless. "I'm sorry. I- I was trying my best. I understand. Do you want me to get out of the car?"

He didn't say he'll do better.

He didn't say that I was wrong, that he loved me, that he didn't see Glory as more than a friend.

The most hurtful thing about rejecting someone is when what you tell them, what you spit out trying to hurt them, is true.

"Did you even care for me?" I said as he got out of the car. "Was this all in my head?"

"I'm sorry, Greatness." Those three words was all he said.

They say when you break up with a person, you cry for days, feeling the emptiness. They say you try to beg them to come back.

But maybe what they say is wrong. Because I didn't even cry. My feelings for him disappeared the moment he went out of the car, walking away from me, walking towards Glory.

Breakups. They weren't filled with tears. It was like I was trying to hold a broken string together, a string thst was getting further and further away, and finally letting go. The moment I did let go, Deathbringer just walked away. Flew out of my arms into the thing he was destined to be with. Because I was the only thing was keeping them from each other.

It just hurt for a little while. And then it was over.

# [25] Regret

[image]

☆Deathbringer☆

*I'm in love with Glory Bright.*

That was the only thing that passed my mind when I walked home from Greatness' car. I loved her much more than I had realized. I was walking towards her even when I didn't want to, worried about her when I had just broken up with Greatness.

Yeah, I was a piece of shit. I agree. I just didn't know that I was capable of feeling so strongly for a person. And because I didn't know, I hurt a lot of people. Greatness was one of them.

I think I always felt it, but I had been lying to myself until that moment. When I saw Glory crying at my doorstep, I knew it had come to a point that I would someday burst.

I also realized then that I could never let Glory know.

I realized how horrible I had been to Greatness when we were eating chocolate ice cream in the living room. Watching Gone with the Wind and seeing how Rhett Butler, a man that has chased the main character for years, tell her how he didn't give a damn- that hit me. Seeing his tired look, just letting everything go. She must have felt like that.

That was when I started crying, silent tears dropping from my face. Glory was too intent watching the movie to know, thank God, but I kept seeing Greatness out of nowhere. I had been a jerk, leaving our dates all the time, leaving her all alone. Letting her like me, telling her I liked her when I knew I loved Glory. And maybe I did like her, a lot. Still, it wasn't enough to outshine Glory. Nothing was enough to outshine Glory.

Maybe I tricked myself into thing that someone as same as me-

coming from the same kind, someone who knew my secrets- might be able to outshine her someday. Because I could never be with Glory.

Because fate was cruel. No matter how much I regretted it, it was there.

Why?

First, I was a criminal. I simply had killed too many people. I never told her, and she would leave me if I ever did. I never wanted her to know. I wanted to remain in her head as nice, charming Deathbringer. Not a boy that killed people for money.

Second, one of my assassinations were on Glory's father.

Yes.

I shot her father in the head.

☆

*"I killed Slaughter," he sa ys when the guards come into the room. "Let me go to Battlewinner. I will go to the mission with Mother and leave the camp."*

*He hides his bloody hands in his pockets . Partly because everyone is staring at him. Partly because they are shaking. He doesn't look at Slaughter's dead body on the ground . He can't.*

*Battlewinner laughs when she sees him, her lips so bright in the darkness. Mother is staring at him with- fear. It's a look that says, what have you done? You are a murderer, an assassin , your innocence is dead.*

*It has been long dead , Mother , he wants to say, but no words come out. He patiently waits for instruction.*

*"You probably heard that you and your mother will be able to get out of this place one you complete the task, haven't you ?" Battlewinner gives him her sharp grin. A girl is next to her- a girl with black hair, staring at him with dark eyes. " Expect your mother to be killed if you don't*

*succeed."*

*Mother. The mother he had sworn to protect from harm, the day he killed for the first time.*

*Mother is narrowing her eyes. She seems to be more bothered by his bloody hands more than the death threat. Battlewinner smiles as she huffs in smoke from her cigarette. The room fills with sickening air.*

*"I won't fail," he replies . "Who's our client?"*

*Battlewinner leans close. Whispering another secret again. The more he looks at this woman, the more he's convinced that they are alike. "I'll only tell you , because you're one of my favorites. It's one of the stars."*

*Stars? He frowns, but he doesn't really care . "Until when?"*

*Battlewinner's lips are shining. They are always shining, the hint of bloody red. "In two days, the man should be dead. His name is Tempest. To my knowledge he is single, with no family. A woman visits him time to time, and he sometimes goes to a big house on Mondays . He usually comes out with a little girl and they take a drive somewhere. Our client wants him killed."*

*"Do they prefer a way?" Mother isn't saying a word, so I'm leading it. "Plain assassination or natural death?"*

*"They say they prefer natural death. The death can't be teased back to them, ever. Understood?"*

*"Yes, Battlewinner. Let's go in and discuss with Mother how you'll let us cut ties with everyone. You might be lying." I give her a grin, just to show that I'm joking. I'm not, though .*

*Her sharp grin again. "Of course. A little haughty, aren't you ? So convinced you'll get the work done."*

*"Of course I will."*

☆

*"I can't. I won't. Go back, Deathbringer. You have enough blood on your*

*hands."*

*"Mother!" Panic . Why is she being like this? This wasn't a part of the plan. "Mother, how could you ? I can't go without you. I- I promised to keep you safe."*

*Her eyes are so empty that they're almost scary to look at . No. No. His mother's sudden morality isn't going to let her die. He won't let her. "Is my life worth that man's? We should stop this, Deathbringer. We can run away , we can start anew, we don't have to murder..."*

*Innocent.*

*His mother was innocent.*

*The car. It was a sports car with the roof wide open. She was supposed to shoot him in the head while he was running through the road in the forest. They had double checked if anyone was there, and nobody was. It was perfect. It was a plan that kept both of them safe, and his mother was suddenly wanting to stop?*

*" Mother , do you think we can get out of this? Do you think they would let us go? We'll be dead in a few days." If you keep living this way, the roaches that call themselves human will get you. They'll do to you what they did to me. "Mother, it's too late. It's him or us. And I want you alive. Mother, please , he'll come soon."*

*He could hear the faint noise of the car. If they didn't shoot him now, their mission would fail. He lived in the fourteenth floor of the apartment, so sneaking into his house was out of the question.*

*"I'm sorry, this is all my fault." Mother was crying. Feeling sadness over someone that they didn't even know. "I should have never joined them in the first place. Perhaps then you would be a normal boy... going to school... not having to murder.."*

*His voice was low. "Listen to me." He gripped her shoulders. "Listen to me, Mother . I don't want to lose you, do you understand me? If I have to lie, if I have to kill, I don't care. I never knew that man in my life and I will never know him . I will never give a shit about what happened to him. It's his life or yours. It's HIM or YOU. If we kill him, we can get out*

*of this mess, we can live together without killing anyone else. Isn't that what you want, Mother?"*

*Mother is sobbing.*

*Why? He thinks. Why are you sobbing? Why are you crying? You're the one living. You're the one that's in a place higher than that man, the one pointing that gun somewhere so it won't be pointed at you. It needs to be pointed somewhere. So why feel remorse that it's not you?*

*The man comes closer . Mother doesn't raise the gun.*

*He takes it from her . And suddenly she is begging, taking her foot with her hands. "Please, Deathbringer, don't put any more blood in your hands. You will go to hell, you will regret it, it will be too much to bear...Don't shoot at that man, I'm begging you. Let's run away..."*

*Running away. But that was too risky. One wrong move and the gun was pointed at them. One wrong step and she would go through the things he had gone through . Why not have the control of the gun themselves so it would never point at them?*

*He didn't know that he could point the gun at himself and not even know it until it was too late.*

*Maybe she knew, how the murders backfired. Maybe that was why she was crying as the car got closer.*

*He has never seen her like this, so vulnerable, so weak.*

*In the end, she was someone that was too weak, he realized. Someone to protect the world from, like his classmates . Someone who couldn't take the outside view, how the real world was like. Quickstrike will have to live under thst veil forever.*

*He raised the gun.*

*He fired at the man, saw the blood thst spurted out . His expression was filled with shock and horror- he steered to the left , and it was like time stopped- he crashed into the tree- the flames shot out like firecrackers.*

*The fire would be even better that hiding the evidence. He tugged at*

*Quickstrike and soon they were running away.*

*He had fired that shot, and the bullets had gone two ways- one to the man, whom they would learn later as Glory Bright's father, and one to himself.*

☆

**Q: Would you be able to forgive a love interest, someone you desperately love , if they killed one of your family members?**

# [26] Letting Go

[image]

☆Deathbringer☆

*I'm so scared," she whispers.*

*I give her a smile. "It's supposed to be scary. Your every step has to be so careful, and they're so daunting. But look at Tsunami and Riptide- they're together and that's all that matters. In the end, it's about trust. So you do the best you can hoping they grow to know it."*

*"You sound like you've been into a lot of relationships." Yeah, I have, thanks to you, who I apparently can't forget no matter how hard I try.*

*"But thanks, Deathbringer."*

*Her hair. Her sun-kissed blonde hair and that sparkling green eyes. I am so daunted by them, so enchanted, that I feel my hand gently flying out to touch their beauty, something I cannot ever hold in my arms. But in that moment, there is just Glory. Not the daughter of the dead man, or the girl that I can't forget. Just Glory. And she's beautiful, and the sun is beautiful, and they are there shining more than anything else in the world without even having a clue.*

*I have to hide everything with a joke, like I always do.*

*"I have. I mean, who can resist such a gentleman?"*

*Perhaps I can't quite control my hands, though, because they reach out and tuck a loose lock of golden hair behind her ear. "See?"*

*Bang.*

*I quickly jolt away, and for some reason I see the man in her beautiful emerald eyes, the man with blood spurting out of his head, with his car setting on fire. Smoke everywhere, and that is the man that created who Glory was, and his blood, the same blood that I saw run onto the seat of his car, run through her veins.*

*The touch is electric. I don't know how else to describe it. It is electric and as hot and horrible as the sun, punishing me, laughing at my thoughts, and yet luring me in at the same time.*

*She grins. "Sir, you are no gentleman," she says, her eyebrows raised to imitate Scarlett O'Hara. God, I love her.*

*And then she does an unbelievable thing- she reaches out and pushes my bangs to the side. It is so sudden that I feel my lip tilting, my eyes on hers, on the eyes of the man's, no, Glory's-*

*"An apt observation," I reply, stroking my imaginary mustache. I try to laugh it off, but it doesn't work. "And you, Miss, are no lady."*

*Only if I could tell you.*

*I can imagine it, the look on her face when I tell her. The look of horror and disgust. Maybe she would even hit me, and perhaps she would even cry in despair. Do I want to see this girl in such pain? The pain of losing everything?*

*Maybe it is the sun, or her golden hair, or maybe the smile that blocks out the memories for a little moment. The eyes that make me forget who I am, and who she is, and what I had done to her. What I am hiding from her.*

*Maybe my look tells her everything.*

*Suddenly, she is whispering. There is a different look in her eyes, something so passionate, so fiery, that it is almost too scary to look at. It is barely a whisper.*

*"I like you."*

*The three little words that make me dizzy, make me feel the warmth of the sun and the fire in her eyes, in her blood that runs through her veins.*

*I love you and I'm scared you would hate me. Selfish, I know.*

*"I like you, Deathbringer."*

*Should I tell you? You're too good to be in my arms. You shouldn't like*

*me. I shouldn't love you. If only- if only you knew what I did to your family-*

*"Do you- like me?"*

*Goddammit, how could I lie? I'm pretty sure I have the Look in my face, the Look I usually give to girls that like me. I can't help it most of the time- it brings back memories, of the women and what they whispered in my ear as they did...as they took away everything...*

*But not Glory, never Glory. I am giving the Look at myself, because I remind myself of those women, of the people that lied and used and manipulated. I hate it, I want her, I want her and I can't have her and maybe I should just tell- tell her everything-*

*"Glory, I-"*

*Tsunami's face comes into the view, a little blush on her cheeks, Riptide's arm around her shoulders.*

*That brings my senses back.*
...

The dream again. Over and over. Torturing me, reminding me that I can never have her.

☆

"It's over for today," he says as we all lay on the gym floor, struggling for breath. "You may all go home now."

The students start to leave, and I'm packing up my stuff as quickly as possible when he sneaks up to me. I instinctively look at him, ready to block, when he raises his hand slightly. He rests his right hand on my shoulder. "Great reflexes. Where did you learn?"

Ha, ha. Very funny, you little piece of shit.

I swear I want to punch that bastard in the face someday. He's my uncle- brother of Quickstrike- but he hates me. Well, he hates everyone, but he especially hates me. I, of course, hate him in return. Who can't? He just has that sort of a HATE ME PLEASE vibe.

I shrug his hand off and go on packing very fast. He kind of lures over me. Everyone's going out. Crap.

"You. Death- guy. Come here for a second. Help me clean up."

Death guy, huh? Nevermind, let's just kill him and get over with it.

I can't keep the hostility out of my voice. "What the hell do you want?"

He gives me one of his hateful grins, his white teeth shining brightly. His voice rumbles. At least that part is the same. "Woah, is that a way to address your teacher, boy?"

"I'm tired, Mr. Teacher, and I want to go home. Also, my mom will beat me up if she finds out I talked to you. So, if you will excuse me."

Big hands grip my arm, squeezing it. Now this is more like freaking Morrowseer. "Don't leave when I'm talking to you. Is your mother doing alright?"

"Yeah, like you'd want to know. Why, do you need money? Are you homeless or something?" What would be more painful, stabbing him with a pencil or simply throwing a punch? I decide pencil, but sadly I don't have one at the moment. So I just watch.

Morrowseer's black eyes are looking deeply into mine, and I hate it. It makes my skin crawl. Like two cockroaches getting ready to fly around me. "I am, actually. I want to move in."

"Yeah, no. Bye bye."

That man. Won't. Let. Me. Go.

I quickly turn back and raise my arm to punch him, but he easily blocks it, grinning lazily. "Your uncle needs help, and you immediately react with violence? Some bad parenting here. I might even ask to have a counseling with your mother for your behavior."

"Do you have any money?" I'm sighing. I'm too tired to even care. "We're kind of broke right now. Do you even have a proper license

for this job?"

"Are you suggesting my work here is illegal?" He grins. Well, sorry to point it out, but your existence should kind of be illegal. "I'll help your mother pay for stuff around the house, I just want to live in her apartment for a while. Does that sound good to you?"

"My mom is going to beat me up if she knows. Mister Morrowseer? Come to or house and talk to your sister yourself instead of threatening one of your students by a hand choke."

"I'll do that, when is she free? Give me her phone number."

Now he's wanting to take her freaking free time and ALSO HER PHONE NUMBER. "God, I don't know. Weekends? And no, I'm not giving you her freaking phone number. Do you even know our address?"

He doesn't reply. That little creep. "Expect me to go there this Saturday. Anyway, how are you? It's been a while. You grew-taller."

Okay, this is disgusting. "Just tell me what you want and stop with all the formality, it's sickening. Like we're in terms of asking each other how we are," I spit out truthfully, jerking my arm away. "Also, I really have to go."

"Calm down, kid." Morrowseer looks at me closely. "Just one more question. Kids were telling me about- one of your friends. Possibly your girlfriend. How is that girlfriend of yours? The one with leukemia?"

Silence.

Morrowseer. He messes up everything.

"Why?" One word, and my voice is filled of venom. "Why do you want to know1 about her? How do you know her?"

Morrowseer looks a little taken back, but he slaps my shoulder. A little harder than he should. "Why are you grimacing? Everyone says you're her girlfriend or something, so I was just trying to trike

a normal conversation. It's not like- we are strangers." That dark, threatening word. *Strangers*. I wish we were.

"I'm going to go." I give him a bad sign with one of my fingers, and soon I'm reaching for the doors. That's when Morrowseer shouts.

"DEATHBRINGER!"

I have never heard him shout until then- and we have known for a few years at least. And me name, too. How strange. There's even a change in his voice.

Desperation. It's clearly in it. Morrowseer's running after me, taking my wrist so tightly, like he's afraid I'm going to go.

What is he playing at?

He comes down to his knees. I can't believe my eyes, but here he is. One hand over his eyes like he's going to cry. Two little words from the big headed monster that I've detested for years.

"Help me."

☆

# [27] Holding On

☆Deathbringer☆

Morrowseer. Do I want him in my life? Does he care about Mother and me?

Ha.

"No." My voice is cold. "I don't want you in my life. I don't want save your butt if that means putting mine in risk. Especially Mother's."

I lean towards him, towards his desperate eyes, and whisper in his ear: "You would stay away from us if you knew what was best for her, too."

Morrowseer shrugs and gets up without another word. "I'll send you money. I just want to ask for one thing, and it's that—"

"SHUT UP." How much have I lost because of this man? Or maybe it's just because he's in the way, because he has always acted like this, like he is more superior than me. "I don't need any of your dirty money. Mother doesn't, either."

Morrowseer stares at me in surprise. After a long moment, when I turn away, he starts gripping his hair with his hands. "Please. Please..."

Well, this is interesting.

The strong Morrowseer, crumbled by a few words. Is this power? It must be. "Maybe on one condition?" The words are too sweet to not say aloud, and they are rolling off my tongue. I'm trying hard to not let my smile slip, but it's too hard. "Tell me why. Obviously it isn't because you care about your sister or me. You never cared. What is it? Another mission?"

He's thinking about it, telling me his secrets. Oh my God. Is this

what Battlewinner loved? The taste of watching people you hate fall to their knees at front of you? "Moon."

What? Moon? "What?" My enjoyment crumples into shock. Is this another one of his tricks?

"Moon. Your friend's-- the one with leukemia-- housekeeper's daughter. Moonwatcher. She's my daughter, and I want to see her. Now that I lost all ties with the group, and Battlewinner's gone. I want to see her and Secretkeeper. I don't even ask to talk to them, just see them when I drop you off their house or something. Give some money to them through-- you."

Moonwatcher. Of course-- I thought she resembled some of my features. Turns out we're related. I have known Moon for too long to just brush everything away and make a contract. "But why? Do they know what kind of person you are?"

Morrowseer looks at me, his lips pressed together. His eyes are narrowed, but they are valuable. I can work with this. "No. Secretkeeper thinks I'm a man that dropped out of nowhere to leave her when she got her baby. She doesn't even know my real name. I wanted to stay away forever, because they might get in danger because of my ties with the assassins, but I'm free from them now and I want to see them. Satisfied?"

"You won't talk to them?" I'm frowning. "But-- but why? Don't you want to meet your daughter and have a conversation with her? Tell her you're her father?"

"Who cares if I'm her biological father, I never raised her. If I tell her, it will only cause her pain. I'm taking a big risk to even seeing them, and I'll never show them my face. I just want to know if they're alright. Even you, heartless Deathbringer, should be wanting to tell me by now."

Moonwatcher. That makes her-- my cousin. The calm girl, the girl living in Glory's house because her mother is a housekeeper. This is tangling up too much.

"I'm not really friends with Glory anymore." Dang it. I should have

lied to Morrowseer and let him help us and tell him the news then. What am I thinking? But it hurts too much to think about.

Morrowseer stops gripping his hair, his eyes flaring. The vulnerable look is gone in a second. "God, you stupid idiot. You told her about her father?"

Now Morrowseer has something against me, something to hold over my head. "No. But I probably should disappear before she finds out. You know-- I didn't even know it was her father before you told me."

Morrowseer laughs, cruelly, passionately. His eyes are flashing, *I have you on your toes now*. "That poor girl. It would be unfortunate to have someone tell her about it, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, so unfortunate that she might fire Moon and her mother when she finds out they're the assassin's cousins."

"Damn you." Morrowseer sighs. "So are you helping me or not? You know, I can get you arrested before you even have a chance to tell them."

That's when the gym door opens, and we both freeze.

"I come here to ask Morrowseer a question and I find little assholes talking about people's life like they're toys you can control however you like," she says, her choppy black hair flying in the wind. She is eating an ice cream cone.

Greatness.

"That rhymed," Morrowseer replies, amused. "Hello, traitor."

☆

We're walking home, me and Greatness, when she slaps me on the face.

"That's for dating me to try to forget Glory," she says when I press my hand on the cheek. "I also want to tell you that I don't have any lingering feelings for you. You never had any for me, so maybe we

can stay friends. Yes or yes."

"Are you mad?" I look at her in disbelief. "Why would you even want that?"

"I don't know. For a few reasons. You know about my history, I know about yours, you owe me a lot so I can get a lot of frozen yogurts from you. Also, I want to help you with Glory."

"Are you out of your mind?" This is it. Greatness has finally turned insane. With her bizarre ideas about justice and whatnot, it has finally turned her into a madwoman. "You do know what I did to-- her father? With your ideas about justice, your best shot is just turning me in."

"I'm not doing it for you," she replies immediately, her eyes narrowed. "You're hurting other people by just standing there doing nothing because you're actually afraid to do something. You're hurting Glory, her dead father, and so many more people. What are you actually planning to do? Keep rejecting Glory, but keep being selfish enough to stay at her side, and act like an innocent person you're not?"

My voice comes out sharper than I intended. "It's none of your business, Greatness."

Greatness laughs. "I know. But maybe it is? Because I saw her act today for the role of Scarlett, and people actually applauded. It was that good. And when she was done, she kept looking around the stage like she was looking for you. You didn't see her face, but hurt she was. You-- you're hurting her more than you realize. You need to be honest with her, or just get out of her life."

"Why do you care all of a sudden?" I roll my eyes. I know, I know I owe so much to Greatness, that I should be kinder, gentler. But Glory is a subject that I just can't allow.

"Do you know what I realized today? Like, Glory's really good at acting. Like, so good I might fall in love with it." She's grinning, enjoying my shocked expression. "Or maybe...her?"

Life really slaps me on the face sometimes. "You're into girls?"

Greatness shrugs. "Why wouldn't I be? Girls are hot. Did I have to hit you with a pan to make you realize that I'm pansexual?"

I look at her for a second. "But like, if you actually chased after Glory I wouldn't be so confident. Don't do that."

"Seriously, though. Would you be okay if I chased after her? If anybody else did? Can you really let her go? My point is, just do something for God's sake."

"I know, okay? But we have been friends for like-- years. Do you have any idea what that's like?"

Greatness looks at me, a weird look in her eyes. "Then lie and stay by her side. Never tell her about it."

Stay by her side.

Lie to her.

Lie to her like I have never shot her father in the head. Like I'm a normal boy that actually deserve to be with her. Hold her in my arms, watch her fall in love with me, fall in love with her in turn. But how? How can I forget that I'm the person that caused her the most pain?

..What if I just make her forget everything? I know I can. I can just make her feel more happy to make up for the pain.

But it wouldn't be real. Am I too selfish to wish for something not unreal? Maybe I am.

And if there's wasn't a lingering question, I would have never told her. Went to her and confess my feelings right that second.

"Do you think she'll stay by my side if I tell her?"

Greatness brushes her raven hair with her fingers, dropping her eyes. "Maybe. You wouldn't know, would you, if you didn't ask? Everybody's different. She might be the type to hate you for eternity

after you tell her. Or she might even forgive you, because her love for you outweighs her pain. It's a risk you have to pay for taking a life."

I'm a coward. I decide to let Glory go at one second, and then realize that I am holding on without even knowing. "It's too hard."

"Or do this." Greatness blinks. "Decide a date where you'll turn yourself in. Confess your love to Glory, tell her the truth or don't. Then go to jail to pay the price. If she doesn't want to see you, she'll never visit. If she does, I guess she'll come to you. Either way, if you don't want to tell her, you can still just disappear out of her life without a second look. I'll take care of the rest."

I can't help but crack a grin. "That's a good plan, but...was this your plan all along? You want me to go to jail?"

Greatness shrugs. "Don't worry, you're underage. The worst you can get is life penalty. But then, I might also be a little selfish and want Glory to look at me the moment you're gone."

I punch her shoulder jokingly. "You weren't joking about that?" I give her a smile. No matter what her intentions are, it is nice to talk to Greatness again. "Do you want to come to my house and talk more about it?"

Greatness gives me a cold grin. "I would like to, but I got Glory's number today and I plan on calling her. Bye bye."

She goes off without another word.

That player.

☆

**In the real Wings of Fire book series, Greatness' sexuality is unknown. The "pansexual" part was added by me and is not canon.**

**Me: GREATNESS AND GLORY FOREVER!!!**

**Readers: This is a GLORYBRINGER story for GOD'S SAKE**

**(Greatness and Glory though— it has a nice ring to it—)**

# [28] I Slit Their Throats

[image]

☆Deathbringer☆

When I go home, Glory's car is parked at the side of the house. I try to get in as quickly as possible, but she gets out immediately, telling her driver to go back.

Well, I'm dead.

"Hello?" Her hair is up into a ponytail. She is thinner, dark circles under her eyes. That's not good news. My anxiety turns into worry, and I open the door for her without a question. She comes in.

"You got thinner. Are you okay?"

Glory doesn't look at me and sits at the couch, her lips firmly pressed together.

"No."

Me, neither.

Glory's holding on to the door to support herself, looking at me with a look of betrayal. I really don't know what to say to her. What to do. It's just too confusing and too bundled that in the end I'm just standing there, hating myself.

Glory's eyes are gazing at the stairs below. "If you're going to walk the other way when I'm around, I want to cancel all the words I said to you. I don't like you anymore. Laugh it off as a joke, do whatever you want."

So much pain in her voice. And why? Because I can't figure out things on my own. In my efforts to help her I seem to be slowly killing her.

"I don't want us to be in this-- uncomfortable situation." Then she

looks at me, staring into my eyes like she's daring me to say something. "Or am I one of the girls you throw away after you get a confession from them?"

God. No. I wish I could, but no. Never you.

*You're hurting other people by just standing there doing nothing because you're actually afraid to do something. You're hurting Glory, her dead father, and so many more people. What are you actually planning to do? Keep rejecting Glory, but keep being selfish enough to stay at her side, and act like an innocent person you're not?*

Damn Greatness and her honesty. I know I shouldn't keep doing this, that I should send Glory home. Tell her I don't want to be friends again. Or just straight up confess. But I'm too scared to do either.

I throw my backpack to the floor, looking away. Silence. I don't know what to say.

"You're a jerk," Glory spits out when I don't say anything. "Don't--don't treat people like they're something you can play with. What am I to you? Just another one of your trophies you wanted to show off to others?"

I can't stare at her, so I stare at her hands instead. They are clenching into a fist. "Why do you do it, anyway? You know it when people like you, and yet you play with their feelings and once they give you what you want you just throw them away. I should have realized it, I should have told you when we were in middle school. I hate it when you do it."

*DO SOMETHING!* I'm shouting to myself. *Stop hurting her.*

Stop thinking about everything and just do something, like Greatness said.

Glory is breathing heavily. Then her voice softens, and it's worse, the exhausted, vulnerable voice. "Say something. Please."

I should tell her to go home, that I don't want to do anything with her.

It would make her cry for a few days. Maybe a few months. But she'll heal. She even has her drama friends now. She can date Starflight, if she really likes him. She'll forget me and I'll move away to somewhere, a place where I can't hurt her.

I should let her go.

"It happened before-- before I met you."

Then I suddenly realize I want to keep holding on. It's like logic is fighting what I really want to do. And if the fighting will keep on hurting her, why shouldn't I just accept everything?

I want to tell you, Glory.

I want you to know me.

I want to unleash this little monster inside little by little and see your reaction. I'm sorry. I'm so selfish and I know. I should let you go, but I keep holding on. Tearing you to pieces. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

I just can't bear the thought that you would hate me if you didn't know. Although you would probably hate me more when you do.

"What?" Glory looks at me, frowning. I slowly walk towards her and sit beside her, leaving a little space between us. "What are you-- talking about?"

"The women." It's cold, terribly cold, and I'm selfish and I hate myself but my mouth is just moving on its own. "I was taken to some place by my father, and there were a lot of women there. They did stuff to me."

A pause.

The hands, the eyes, the voices, the smiles. I remember everything like it happened yesterday. Like they're in this room, even though I killed them all.

"They kept whispering they liked me, and they kept touching me. I was really young. It would last for-- for hours."

"Oh my God." Glory's blocking her mouth with her hand. "Oh my God, Deathbringer. What-- what the--"

"It continued before someone came to rescue me. For weeks I wouldn't let anyone come near me, except the woman that saved me. I did horrible things to try to forget it." Things you can't imagine. "I--I--" I killed your father, Glory.

But they don't come out.

Glory is listening quietly, and I'm too scared to look at her.

"I try to stop it, but when I see girls, when they tell me they like me, I just-- I can't help but remembering." A deep breath. Tears are stinging my eyes and I can't cry, not in front of her. I should always keep this perfect mask on before her. So she can never see this weird-- this horrible person inside. But it's slipping and once it slips it just breaks entirely. "Maybe I know they like me, but I don't want to lose the friendship, and I always hope that they don't tell me their feelings because it would ruin everything. Selfish, I know. And then at middle school I kind of started dating to see if it would help get over some things, but it always came back. But I know I hurt them, I hate myself for it. I'm sorry."

Glory takes my hand, and it's warm, so warm and so comforting that the roaring waves inside me are calmed in a second.

I'm digging my right hand into my palm, holding everything in so I don't cry. What am I doing? Am I doing the right thing, telling her? What if I'm just moving the pain to her shoulders?

"You should have told me," Glory says quietly. "If I knew-- I wouldn't have told you my feelings. I shouldn't have. I'm sorry, Deathbringer, I should be the one that should apologize. I didn't even know, and I kept hating you, spitting out hurtful words when you-- you went through all this--"

Don't cry don't cry don't cry. Please don't cry, Deathbringer. "It isn't your fault, Glory. I should have told you before, but I was--too scared you would hate me."

Glory shakes her head. "Why would I hate you?"

You have no idea.

Suddenly, my shoulders are shaking, and sobs are escaping my mouth. I block it with my hand, trying to block it, trying to erase everything. "I'm sorry, I think I should-- go to the bathroom or something."

Glory suddenly wraps me around with her arms. God, I don't deserve this. I'm a monster. It's so warm and comforting that it's something I don't-- can't-- deserve. And it's so painful, telling her the truth knowing that she'll hate me for it later. It's so confusing and hateful that I can't do anything but try to stop my tears.

"Deathbringer, cry if you need to. Crying isn't weak. Remember the night I suddenly showed up at your doorstep when I was crying?" Your crying isn't my crying. You're someone letting something go because you're strong enough. I'm crying because of guilt. It's sinful, it's dirty, it's horrible.

"And maybe I'm selfish," Glory continues on. "But I really liked it when I cried with someone. Like the pain was disappearing and I was letting go of everything. I was so afraid that you would be annoyed or something, because a lot of people would be, but you just-- you comforted me. And it's my turn to be there when you need me, right?"

She takes a deep breath.

"So don't cry alone, Deathbringer. Cry with someone, tell them how you feel, don't try to be perfect all the time. Let your mask slip once a while with people you can trust. Just lean on their shoulders like they leaned on yours when they needed it."

There is silence.

Should I tell her? Show her what a monster I am?

"Glory." How much of my sufferings can you take without breaking yourself? "Glory." My voice is getting louder and louder. And suddenly I'm gripping her shirt, tears in my eyes. A monstrous smile

on my face. "I don't deserve to cry. I can't cry. Do you know why?"

Yes, tears are dripping in my face, and for some reason I'm smiling. Laughing at how the gods have created me.

I'm sorry, Glory.

"What do you— Deathbringer, I—"

I'm gripping her shoulders, and my breaths are coming out unevenly. How disastrous. Countless times I have read assassin books, where the assassins fell in love with their target and how they were forgiven so easily. How their murders were so easily forgotten.

Why must reality be so cruel?

"Glory, I killed them." I'm whispering in her ear, that smile on my face, tears dripping. I'm a mess. I really am a mess. "Do you get it now?"

I cant see Glory's face, but she stops talking.

I'm so amused for some reason that I have to force myself to not laugh. Yes, they must be in this room right now, punishing me for what I did to them. Making me fall in this girl, the girl whose father I killed.

At that point the murders seemed justified, but because of that murder I had destroyed someone's life. But was there a way that I could get out of there without killing?

I tell myself that it wasn't possible. But maybe it was.

My shoulders are shaking, but my voice surprisingly comes out clear:

*"I slit their throats."*

# [29] Question

☆Deathbringer☆

*"I saw an interesting question from a book." I am walking slowly so Glory can catch up. "You know, like a philosophical question."*

*Glory's eyes suddenly light up. She reaches out and grips my shirt-- carefully not touching my hand-- motioning me to wait. Her face is red from the exercise, although we haven't walked that much. "What is it?"*

*When I stop, Glory's hands fall to her sides. "First, you need to answer this." I am staring at her, shouting at myself to not freak out. "Are you going to marry?"*

*She ponders for a moment, and then nods, a mischievous smile on her face. "Probably. If I live that long, that is."*

*I ignore the second part of the answer and move on. "Okay." Deep breaths, Deathbringer. "You are in love with your husband. Like, not just love. You would die for him." Pause. "But turns out your husband happened to be the person that killed one of your family members. It was a long time ago, like couple years before. Would you be able to forgive him?"*

*"That's just a really weird question." Her voice is light and joking, but Glory's eyes, they tell a different story. They are bitter. The eyes of someone who has lost a loved one, the eyes of hatred. It's not staring at me-- the hate is not directed towards me-- but it pierces through me as if they really are. Because, in a way, they should be.*

*"No." Glory runs her fingers through her hair, her hands slowly curling into fists. She's staring at something distant, and her lips are tipped down in a frown. Anger. She's watching the sky as if it was the one that shot her father. When, in reality, I did. "Never."*

*Maybe a girl as young as her should go on about forgiveness and mercy. That would be the answer everyone desires to hear.*

*But not her. Not Glory.*

*"I'll rip that man to shreds." She smiles, like she can see it happening right front of her eyes. "I assume he doesn't know what it must feel like. Having your loved ones killed. How it breaks families apart."*

*This girl, this dying girl, is filled with bitterness. There is no space left in her heart for love. There is only room for blood and death and the smiles of a tortured animal.*

*"I'll break him like he has broken me."*

*Why, Glory? Why have the gods twisted our destiny so I could meet you?*

*Sometimes I wish I never had. That this girl with sun-kissed hair never appeared in front of me, showing me something that I shouldn't dare think of. Or that the man I killed hadn't been her father. There are so many possibilities, but here I am, giving her a sad smile. I am staring at the ground because if I look at her now, I'm afraid I'll cry.*

*Glory, I hate myself. I wish we'd never met. I wish I didn't exist, so you would be happy. I wish I didn't have to feel the guilt of seeing you like this, being reminded that it was I who made you this way.*

*I want to tell you the truth. Because you deserve to hear it. But I have gotten too close to you, and now I can't do anything without thinking of you every three seconds. And I see how you are starting to look at me, like you love me. Maybe not love. Just seeing me as more than a friend. I don't even know my own feelings. I don't know what love is, even if it is something I feel right now. I just know that my everyday is brightened up by you.*

*On cool nights I look up at the sky and tell myself that it isn't my fault. Selfish, I know. That it was written on the stars. Like some strange play that we had to participate in to satisfy some heavenly power. Concluding that it was the fault in our stars that made us this way. Like what Shakespeare said.*

*But Glory. That would be too good to be true. And you would hate that. You like to face things, even if it takes you a long time. Even if you run*

*away for a little while. You always turn back. That's something that makes me different from you. You would say, no, coward. That fault is not in our stars. It's in ourselves.*

*If I wasn't scared of asking you questions I would ask you one more.*

...

*Glory.*

*What have we done to each other?*

☆

# [30] Realization

☆Deathbringer☆

There are some moments when I'm reminded of the fact. That Glory is slowly dying.

That she has leukemia. That she probably doesn't have much left. And on some days I find myself being shocked, like I have just heard it.

Just like that, I ignore it for months. Somehow justifying that Glory cannot die, just because I can't imagine a life without her. Thinking, *she would pull off something that nobody has before. She would be the first patient to live a long life. The doctors would figure out something.*

And then death slaps me on the cheek.

Because death is like that. Cruel. Barbarous. Brutal. Laughing as it snatches that thin veil away, telling me the truth. That Glory is dying. That she will die soon.

☆

Anger. Fear. Hatred. Disgust.

So many things I expected to hear from Glory. The one thing I didn't even imagine of is this calm girl sitting front of me. Her face is pale and her entire body radiates tiredness. And yet she speaks.

"Deathbringer." She is still. Undisturbed. But it is not the usual calmness that surrounds Glory. This is dangerous calm. Like how a disaster becomes silent just before erupting, destroying everything around it.

I'm staring at the floor. I don't look at her eyes, even when she waves her hand weakly. I nod my head. *Go on.*

Silence.

"I would," Glory whispers. She takes a deep breath, and her words are coming out short and brief. Her hand is on my shoulder, and it is so cold. I want to jerk away from her. Block my ears. But the next words come. "I would have done the same."

I can't say a word. I want to tell her to stop, but nothing comes out. I am choking, but no sound can be heard.

"People like that. I would want to kill them, too." Glory tilts my head so I have nowhere else to run. I have to look at her. "Those people don't know how much pain they inflict on others. How they break innocent people. Deathbringer, you saved other kids from going through the same thing."

Should I be happy? Relieved? Realize that I can tell her about what I did to her father?

"Those kinds of people." Her voice is so low that I almost can't hear her next words. "They deserve to be punished."

That is when I realize. No.

Glory's eyes are bitter. She's thinking of something else as she says those words. Everyone's beliefs are shaped by the things they went through. Maybe it's just my guilt that lives inside my conscience. But I can't help but imagine her father's death right away. I can think of it like I have gone through it myself. The days she spent right after her father passed away. After, she probably believes, he died in a car crash. The days she spent alone in her room, tears streaming down her face.

I stare at her blankly. Look into her tired eyes. Her pale, thin face. That is when Death decides to tear that veil apart. Making me understand something about the girl in front of me.

She is dying.

I immediately know, right then. *I can't stay here. I must run away.*

That I can't be selfish anymore. I must let her go.

☆

Murderers don't believe in gods. They're gods themselves-- taking life whenever they choose, *whenever* they choose, degrading it, not viewing it as something of value.

That was one thing I figured out when Glory collapsed a few years before. Everyone was crying. Even Grandeur was crying. Tears were streaming down her face, although she was making no sound. I can still see her thin fingers gripping the hospital bed as if it would make Glory alive again. Another hand holding a cross. When she saw me, she whispered, "Pray, Deathbringer, pray."

I couldn't bring myself to tell her that I didn't believe in gods. That I couldn't have a religion.

All I, a murderer, could do was to convince myself that it's not today. That yes, she might die someday. But it's not today. Any day but today. It was a strange way of thinking, but it didn't stop me. I kept telling myself that she couldn't die just because I couldn't imagine a life without her.

I kept thinking, *she won't die. I know she can't die. She's that kind of a person who becomes a miracle. A blessed person that wins over everything despite what everyone says. The one that lives just to tell those bitchy life that she's even a bigger bitch.*

Glory's smile kept getting blurred over by the sweat of pain. I wanted to kiss her or die with her. I wanted to do something.

Instead, I watched. Convinced that the ones left living were the real ones in hell.

Because, in that moment, I felt like I was.

But even now, I am convinced that Glory cannot die. She's too bright and too breathlessly beautiful to let go of this short, bittersweet thing called life.

In my head, the dying girl simply cannot die. Because she is strong. She has loved ones surrounding her. Even if she loves me, she'll forget someday, when she meets a better person. The pain will plummet after a little while.

So I decide on turning myself in. Running away from her, as I always do. But this time, I don't feel like running away. I feel like I'm turning back, facing myself.

☆

# PART 3

☆Glory☆

*"As for love...*

*no, having once written that word*

*I can write nothing more."*

- <The Setting Sun>, Osamu Dazai

# [31] Mother

☆Glory☆

Ah, the familiar sight of the hospital room. The smell of people holding onto their last breath.  The white walls and the curtains that try to hide me from them. Blocking everything else around me until I am the only one existing. Breathing.

Inside those curtains, I am lying with my ex-best friend. There's only the two of us. Trying to live the best we can. Trying to get rid of the other, but we are both so stubborn that it's slowly killing us.

The last time I was here, I knew one thing. The next time I came into this room, I would have no hope left.

I am at the final stage of cancer.

Will I die? Really? How? In my sleep or in the middle of the afternoon? Maybe I will die today. I lie there, staring at the white ceiling, imagining how my breath would slow down. How my heart would stop. What would happen next.

When I turn my eyes to the other side, a woman is sitting on the chair awkwardly, shifting as if she knows she doesn't belong. Her brown hair-- it must be a wig, but it looks so real-- is shining as it meets the light of the hospital room. I startle, and she flinches when I open my eyes to look at her.

Anaconda.

Anaconda clears her throat. "I'm not here to do anything." She blinks, as if she's a little sheepish. "Um. Jambu and I heard about you, and he wanted to come and visit. He went outside to get a drink for us."

"Oh." I suddenly remember how angry I am at her. My voice suddenly becomes colder. "Where is grandmother?"

"I told her she should get some sleep." That's some good news. I'm not sure if she had any sleep after I passed out. The last time I saw her, her eyes were bloodshot and red. Anaconda stares at me, as if I'm a whole new creature. There's something in her eyes-- regret? Sadness? Pain? Pity? I genuinely hope that it's none of them. "The plan to Europe. I canceled it after I heard you were...that you passed out."

I sigh. "What do you want?"

"Excuse me?"

"It's not like we're suddenly mother and daughter, right? We're past that. Do you want something from me?" She seems genuinely startled, like she still thought I would run smiling to her if she made the first move. The truth is, I'm too tired for that now. I've tried everything.

"I just..." She trails off, like she doesn't know herself. A moment of silence. "I don't really know, actually. I guess I just wanted to see you." *Now? What about 16 years before?*

I gulp the things I want to say to her face. I don't know what to say to her, so I just sigh and close my eyes again. Hoping that Jambu would come sooner. All I can hear is the hushed, unfathomable talking sounds from the rooms next to us.

Time with my mother. I would have killed for it a few years ago. I wreck my head for things we can talk about. Well. All the questions I imagine asking her trace back to the ultimate one. "Do you regret it?"

"Regret what?" She must have thought I was sleeping. She sounds surprised.

"I don't know. Becoming a superstar." Pause. I hesitate, but I conclude that I have nothing to lose. Dying has very little positive aspects to it, I realize. "Meeting my dad. Having me. Anything."

"I don't regret any of those things." The answer itself pains me. It's not what I expected. Is she lying? "I made a choice, and I'm happy about them. I was born to act, and a lot of people feel happy seeing me on TV. That makes me content. I have to admit, I have an obsession at getting attention." She giggles like a little girl. To make sure she continues, I also crack a smile.

"Did I ever tell you how I met your father?"

I open my eyes, a little bit. I did not expect her to be this blunt. "No."

"You must know that your father was a movie director. He was good, but I guess there were better people." She thinks for a moment. "Something always went wrong at the things he couldn't control. The main actor turned out to be a rapist. An accident on set. After a few of those, he just couldn't make much money. And then he had to use lesser known actors, which made him even worse off."

I blink, trying to remember how my father looked. I find that I can't, not quite. All I remember is his green eyes. Not the exact color-- just that my father used to tell me we had the same eyes. I remember staring into mine for hours at a time, just to guess how my father's looked. "I met him at a small party, before his unfortunate accidents. A lot of people were having high expectations of him. He was very handsome, and I guess we immediately clicked." She pauses. "I was married then. It hadn't been long since I had Jambu. My husband introduced me to him."

She says it so naturally, almost dreamily, that I blink in shock. But I don't say a word. "We met in secret after that. During the times my husband went on a vacation. When Jambu went to school. When I was taking a movie scene close to your father's house. And then I realized that I was pragnent with you." She stops there. "My husband found out about everything. Or maybe he even knew before all that. I don't know. I didn't really care back then, I was too young." She gives me a bittersweet smile.

"A took a break from theaters until you were born, in one of our unknown mansions until you were born. I didn't go to see you when

your father was there, because then my husband would be furious. He threatened to divorce me." She sighs. She clenches her hands into fists, and I'm surprised to see her angry. "And then your father died in that...car accident." Her voice is quiet.

Our conversation is over.

After a moment of silence, I ask her, "Did you know he liked cars a lot?"

"Yes, of course." She gives me a soft smile. "He liked apples, too. Green apples. He says they reminded him of your eyes."

I had not known that before. "He loved you a lot."

Anaconda looks away, not replying. She pauses for a moment. "Your...cancer. Is it very serious?"

"Well, I'm dying," I say matter-of-factly. "I'm at the final stage. I'd say it is pretty serious."

Silence.

I can feel myself having a spark of hope. But I remind myself, over and over again, who this woman is. That our history can't be fixed with just a small conversation. That it's way more complicated than that.

When Anaconda doesn't say more, I close my eyes, determined to be like this until Jambu comes.

Suddenly, my memory drifts to the day when my mother left. Although I was very young back then, I can still remember little clips of that day. It blurs in my mind like a dream so much that I'm not even sure if it really happened. But the whiteness of the hospital room recalls the lady with the shots.

She would come about once a month, always wearing that white coat that stunk of some kind of metalic smell. Sometimes she would come into the house with my dad. She was very pretty, perhaps similar looking to my mother, although nowhere as beautiful. Apparently she was from a private hospital my grandmother went

to. I hadn't got most of my shots when I lived with my father, which freaked grandmother out.

After my father died, she would come more frequently, her metalic smell getting stronger and stronger. On one of her visiting days, I was crying a little because I didn't like my shots. Grandmother was firm and told me that if I cried, I couldn't see my mother. That made me shut up. Grandmother left the room-- back then, she didn't like me that much. She probably couldn't help viewing me as anything other than a sign of her daughter's failure.

The nurse took out a box and got ready to give me a shot. I refused to cry, shook my head when she asked if I wanted some candy. Then I saw her take another container from her pocket and injecting that to me instead.

I wanted to ask what it was, but I was too busy whimpering in pain. Following my eyes, the nurse smiled. "It's good for your body. It's very expensive, but it's a present from your mother, because she wishes you well." She reached out and tugged at my cheek. I was hungry for an adult's attention at that time and showed her my biggest, prettiest smile. She laughed. "But you have to keep it a secret, or I can't come anymore."

I nodded eagerly.

When I met my mother, she whispered to me that someday, she might introduce me to her world. I didn't know what it was, but I wanted to be in it, badly. The first time we met-- at least the first I can remember-- I whimpered that I wanted to see Dad. It was after the car accident. After I saw the expression on her face, though, I stopped asking. Later, our visits would be silent and awkward. But after I got the shots, I had realized how my mother had loved me all this time. For that entire day, I was bubbly, complimenting her beautiful face, telling her that I wanted to be like her. In incomplete sentences, with mixed words, because I was very little then. However, I could tell, even at that time, that she was pleased.

One day, during the sixth or seventh visit, I told her about the shots. I whispered it into her ear: "I know that you give me hurt thingy once a month. That's how I knew you love me!"

She laughed, pushing my curls back. "Hurt thingy? What is that?"

I motioned with my hand. She suddenly stared at me, her eyebrows together. "Really? Who told you?"

"The nurse." From the expression on her face, I wondered if I was going to get in trouble. "Every time, she takes one from her pocket and puts it into my body."

Anaconda stared at me without a word. She seemed to be thinking hard.

"Since when?" Anaconda's voice was unnaturally high. "She took it from her pocket? Are you sure?"

She suddenly stood up, which made me very upset. "Can't you stay for another hour?" I asked timidly. I knew that I had done something wrong. I had to make up for it, so I tugged on her dress. "Please, Mommy."

She shook her head sharply, slapping my hand so I would let go. "I'm leaving. Call Grandmother, Glory. I have to go now." I remember crying from shock. My dad had never hit me, not even that lightly, before.

Everything else is a blur. Anaconda left and didn't come for months. When she came back, after about an year-- during that time, I had been diagnosed with leukemia-- I refused to see her. I remember the date because I used to mark it on our calender, even though I knew Grandmother hated to see those red marks. I counted the days since Anaconda left. When she finally came, I was standing behind my room door, kind of hoping that she would apologize and insist on meeting me. I had even dressed and planned on what we would do that day so a minute wouldn't be wasted. I eagerly listened for her to tell me how she missed me. Maybe even giving me a kiss on the forehead, the way my father used to do.

She did none of those things. Anaconda stormed out of the house and never came back.

☆

When I wake up, I can no longer hear Anaconda's voice. I stir, making a groaning noise. My voice is drowned by four hushed ones.

"As Clay's new girlfriend, Peril should have come," someone says hotly. I immediately recognize the voice. "Glory's the one that absolutely destroyed the freaky Scarlet, therefore freeing Peril."

"You didn't bring Riptide, either," Starflight points out. He sounds annoyed.

"Peril seemed really scared when I offered," Clay replies. "Do you think I did something wrong?"

"Relationships are so complicated." I can hear Sunny groan, and find myself agreeing immediately. I start to push my eyes open, and all of the voices disappear at one instant. There's five people staring at me-- Tsunami, Sunny, Starflight, Clay, Greatness.

I almost laugh out loud because I'm so glad to see them again. "Hi." After a moment, I realize that I probably look like a mess, but I flash them a smile anyway.

"Are you feeling okay, Glory?" Tsunami immediately asks, reaching out and placing her hand over my forehead.

"I told you we needed to be quiet if we didn't want to wake her up." Starflight turns to me. "But yeah, are you okay?"

"I'm good," I muster a reply. "How's school?"

Tsunami looks at me as if she's worried, but when I motion with my hand, she begins excitedly, "Guess who got a new girrrrrrrlfriendddddd."

"Clay?" I give him a thumbs-up. "Did Scarlet come out of the hospital yet?"

"She did, but she's suspended. You have no idea how happy everyone was. Turns out nobody liked Scarlet's tyranny, but we were all too scared to say anything," Clay explains. He blushes when Tsunami pokes him through her arm.

"Everyone's leaving, one by one," Tsunami sighs. "They're all flying away from my nest. Meeting their partners. Leaving this old woman, alone."

"I'm still here," Starflight complains. "I'm going to stay single and bother you for the rest of my life."

"Me, too," Sunny says, grinning.

Tsunami shakes her head. "You guys need to find your love of your life. How about you, Glory? Why isn't Deathbringer here?" Greatness looks up, waiting for my answer.

"I...don't know." I can't tell them. I sneak a look at Greatness, wondering if she knows. "Maybe he'll come later."

"Can I say something?" Sunny pipes up. We all turn to her. "Um. I'm aromantic. Do you guys know what that means?" She doesn't wait for an answer, as if she's scared to know. "I don't feel any romantic attraction to anyone. Um. Yeah."

We all stare at her in silence. Finally, Greatness speaks. "That's cool. I'm pansexual."

Sunny looks genuinely surprised. "That's nice."

"So.. you don't like anyone?" Starflight asks, astonished. "Is that why--" He cuts himself off, blushing. He groans when we all turn to him. "Never mind."

"Everyone knows you used to like Sunny." Clay pats him on the back, apologetic. "It was obvious."

Starflight hides his face in his hands. "I don't! I mean, I-I used to, but not anymore..." His voice becomes timid and trails off, and we all stifle our laughter. I feel shocked, like I'm watching a movie.

*Wait.*

Tsunami seems serious. "Really, Sunny? But I...All those months, I kept pressuring you to make a boyfriend." She punches herself. "God, why don't I catch on these kinds of things? I'm so sorry. I can't

even imagine how stressful that would have been."

Sunny smiles, and she looks genuinely happy. "It's alright. I know you meant well, 'Nami. I just...wanted to tell you guys, I guess. Is this what we call out of the closet? Such fresh air."

Greatness snorts.

*Sunflower. A flower that watches the sun. Sunny. Starflight likes Sunny.* "Starflight," I begin carefully. "Do you..Do you exchange emails with..." *No no no no no.*

Starflight grins, his ears still red from embarrassment. "With dafodil? Which is you? Yep."

Now, it is my turn to cover my face. Everything erupts at once, asking questions, and I just shake my head. I regret ever posting that on the school website. Starflight is watching me mischievously, like he knows who I was talking about. I mean, it's very obvious.

We talk about all kinds of things, and to see the hospital room so crowded is like a new thing to me. Nobody, except Deathbringer, has been in it. Ever. We talk about how Clay asked Peril to the dance, how Kestrel cursed when Tsunami went to the swimming club, how much homework we used to have.

That's when I realize, that yes. We're just a couple of kids. Deathbringer is, too. We've barely tasted the world.

After a few hours, they grudgingly stand up to leave. They all say their goodbyes to me, wishing me to heal faster. I don't tell them that I can't, but I'm guessing that they know that already. Tsunami even leaves some flowers for me to see. Greatness goes out last. "Glory, did you hear from Deathbringer?" She hesitates. "He hasn't come to school for days."

My heart thumps. *Do you know, Greatness?* I want to ask her. But I also don't want to put Deathbringer's secret in danger. "I'll try to contact him today." Greatness nods, and although she looks like she wants to say more, she just goes out.

I call Deathbringer all night. Deathbringer doesn't answer to any of

them.

☆

# [32] Underwater Silence

☆Glory☆

Hospital room. The more I spend my time there, the more I feel I'm separated from the world. I can hear Grandmother talking to the doctors outside, just as she did yesterday and the day before. Their faint voices reach me like a buzz.

I look around the room, groaning and feeling the space around me with my fingers. I open the curtain slightly. A calender is hung up on the wall, and, despite myself, I think of Anaconda again. Perhaps mothers are people that we can never erase from our lives. Even if they're not very good at their role.

Suddenly, a date comes into my mind. It's the second audition for *Gone with the Wind.* I wanted to try out as Scarlett, to stand up on stage. Maybe a part of me wanted to show Anaconda how similar we were. But no, everything is ruined once again by cancer, my once best friend, the one that must kill me in order to stay alive. I suddenly feel very dizzy.

I wonder what Deathbringer's thinking right now. If he would come to visit me again. It reminds me of the time I waited for Anaconda, and I realize that I'm the one always waiting, the one marking on calendars, the one missing people because I can't take a step out of this damn hospital.

I search the room for my phone as quietly as possible. I find it on the lamp table and unconsciously dial Deathbringer's number. I'm about to click the call button when I remember the conversation I had with Deathbringer. That seems like a long time ago.

*"I slit their throats."*

Murderer.

Suddenly, a chill runs down my spine, and I throw my phone to the

bed. I told him that I would have done the same in his position. But would I have, really? But what can I tell him? He matters more to me than those people that he killed.

Saying that, it sounds so simple. But to realize that your childhood crush has ever killed a person, reminding yourself time to time as you go through the day, is a very strange feeling. I don't know if I have to feel sad or scared.

I'm still sweating, and when the sound of the door opening reaches me with the slightly cold air, I shiver. Somebody is coming in.

"Can I see her?" I feel a jolt. Deathbringer. The murderer, the boy who rejected me, the love of my life. His voice is rough and he's speaking very fast. I can hear Grandmother's low reply.

"She's sleeping, Deathbringer. You know what state she's in. Come again next time."

"Is she okay?" I don't know if I should speak up, but my mouth seems frozen. "Is she...worse?"

His worried voice erases a part of my fear, and I realize that there's nothing in the world that I want more right now than to see him. "You can come in. I'm okay."

Grandmother runs into the room first, her eyes bloodshot. I feel a twinge of guilt. I'm the one dying, and yet Grandmother is the most miserable. "I'm feeling good, really." It's true. Today seems to be one of the good days.

"You know we have treatment today, Glory. Deathbringer can come later." Grandmother's voice is begging, but I know that I have to speak to Deathbringer. I lightly shake my head.

"It won't be long." Deathbringer is hesitating, as if deep in thought. I'm curious, and I muster the courage to finally look at him again. His face is thinner, he keeps running his hands through his hair as if he's very nervous. Grandmother also notices this, and looks worried. "Please."

"I'll be alright," I assure Grandmother. Grandmother nods slightly

and reluctantly leaves the room, turning back to the doctors. Deathbringer doesn't meet my eyes and plumps down on the chair beside my bed.

A moment of silence. I want to press my hands to his face, but I'm afraid he'll pull away. He sighs, and finally looks at me. In his eyes there are determination.

"Glory." *Glo-ry.* He drags out the word, as if he wants to cling to it. As if he doesn't want to continue. His voice is low, filled with sadness and ashes. "I have something to tell you."

☆

"Glory, remember what I told you about the women?" I nod. Deathbringer is sitting beside my bed, not quite meeting my eyes. His hands are clenched tightly together. "In the assassination camp that I went to, the first thing put in our heads was that the only thing we could do was kill. The moment we stopped killing, we would be worthless. Even after we broke ties with the entire thing, we were broke. We sold our house, Mother came in late at night. I was literally slapped in the face by poverty, and I had never even seen it before."

I'm listening, closing my eyes. Leaning my head back on the wall. He continues. "Mother was who had it the hardest. She knew a lot of things, but nothing in formal papers. She was recruited when she was in high school, and to the world she wasn't even a high school graduate. Everywhere we went, people ignored us. After a while, she began meeting men. And, Glory, I knew she hated every one of them. So I went back to the assassination camp."

"You went back?" I ask in disbelief, my eyes snapping open. Deathbringer nods. "They were the only person I knew. I wanted money. The woman there asked me who I wanted to kill, but I refused. I told her that I would pay her back. But she insisted on me killing. And then she told me that the reason Mother broke ties with them was because she married my dad. I thought they had me on accident when she was on a mission, but I figure my mom never used those methods. After she met him, she wanted to stop the killings. And the woman-- we call her Battlewinner-- she told

Mother to kill my father." A pause. "And she did. After Battlewinner told me that, she gave me the money." His hands are shaking.

I reach out to him, trying to grab his hand, but he pulls away. I stare at him, surprised. "If it's too hard, Deathbringer, you don't have to tell me."

"I *have* to tell you." He goes on feverishly. "I went back to Mother and gave her the money. She stared at me suspiciously and asked where I got it, and I told her the truth. And do you know what she did? She slapped me, even though I told her I didn't kill anyone for it. She said, 'The money that woman gives you is the cost of somebody's life.' And it is true-- that's how Battlewinner got rich. Mother threw the money on the floor, stomping on it. She crumpled it and ripped it. Glory, my mother had to work for months to earn that much money. And she just-- she destroyed it. She started to cry, saying that she didn't want me to do those things anymore. And she asked me why I would possibly want to kill for money."

"Deathbringer—" I try to calm him down, but he shakes his head violently.

"I have to say this at once, or I can't say it, Glory." A huge breath. "And I replied, because the people that I killed didn't matter to me. Do you understand? Because I didn't want her to live like that. For her, I could do anything...And do you know what she told me? She told me that the ones I killed might be important. She said, 'What if one day, my name is written on the envelope Battlewinner gives you? Would you kill me then?' And then she told me that I didn't know anything. That I'll someday kill someone important to me because I'll get trapped. And that I would start to regret everything and hate myself. And you know what? I had already done it before, when we broke ties with the group."

Deathbringer stops abruptly, his eyes searching for anything. The only thing they're not doing is not meeting mine. I speak quietly. "I'm sorry."

The boy next to me snaps his head up, looking surprised. "Why? Why would you be sorry?"

"Because you were only a kid when you did those things. You didn't want to do it. You just-- everything else made you like that."

"Stop." Deathbringer covers his face with his hands. "Don't talk to me like that. I don't deserve it."

"What do you mean?" I'm feeling confused, and I'm kind of wishing he would stop because he's shaking too much. "Deathbringer, listen to me. I get that you did those things, but you couldn't help it. The fault isn't yours, just the people around you."

"I killed your father." That cuts my words. He spits those words out like a curse. And it is.

My voice, in turn, is poisonous. "Don't joke around like this." I know he's not joking. He would never joke around with a subject that I am sensitive to. He would never make a joke with the voice he's using now.

"Battlewinner told us to shoot a man. He would always drive a car in the afternoon, and our job was to make it look like an accident."

Silence. There's this horrible, daunting feeling that just sits in my chest. A haunting thought that lingers in my mind: *he's finally telling me everything.* There's this flash of*, this can't be real. This must be just a dream.*

When I realize that it's not, I want to run away from him.

"*Stop*." Tears are swelling in my eyes. "Just don't say anything."

"They told us that we'll be killed if we failed. And if we succeeded, we would break ties with them forever. And in the middle of it, Mother refused to do it, and she was crying. But I took the gun from her hands and--" His voice breaks. "I shot him in the head, and he looked up, and I could see--" He cuts himself off, but I can no longer see him because I'm blinded by my own tears.

"STOP!" I'm reaching out, flailing my arms, trying to stop him from talking. "SHUT UP! *I DON'T CARE WHAT YOU WANT TO SAY!*"

"You know what's funny? I did that to keep Mother safe, and she

doesn't even trust me anymore. After that, she thinks I would be monstrous enough to kill her. I can't ever cook in the house because she's afraid I'll poison her. She doesn't let me touch the knives. She wakes up during the night and goes around the house because she's afraid I'll kill her." Deathbringer's sobbing.

I'm blocking my ears with my hands, but I can't help but hear his words. "I'm sorry, Glory, I'm so sorry. I'm going to turn myself in after a few days. I'm sorry. *I'm so sorry.*" He's saying the words over and over again. I'm crying so loud, trying to stop his words from reaching me. Trying to drown them all.

Father.

He killed my father.

My first instinct would be to doubt him, to laugh at his joke. But I can't because I know he isn't joking. That he's actually serious.

Deathbringer killed my father.

He's the one that destroyed my life.

I take my hands off my ears. I don't know what I'm trying to do, but I reach out and furiously hit him. Trying to hurt him just like he has hurt me. Wanting him to feel the pain that I went through. I can hear the door opening, probably a nurse or Grandmother, coming in to see what all this fuss is about, but they are all far away. Right now, everything is silent. It's as if we're underwater, Deathbringer and I. Slowly choking each other to death.

The only thing I can feel is Deathbringer. I'm grabbing at his hair, slapping his face, scratching him with my nails--and he just sits there. Still and quiet. Like he's just taking all my anger in, accepting it. Maybe he knows he deserves it.

I hate him for it.

I'm mumbling words that even I can't decipher. *I hate you and I want to hurt you and I'll kill you.* I'm screaming at him.

Strangely, at that exact moment, the email I wanted to send him

after he rejected me shifts into my mind. Thinking of the time he saved my life. Loving him with everything I had.

*You were there, breaking the horrible silence, the peace, the quietness that I struggled to keep because I wanted to hide everything- you were messing it around , shattering it, playing with it . You had reached out and heard my screams although I was screaming underwater.*

Underwater silence.

Deathbringer, the one that pulled me out, is now dragging me under.

# [33] Chameleon

☆Peril☆

The only way Chameleon survived was to stick to a powerful person like a parasite. He immediately became whatever was asked of him-- the funny friend, charming boyfriend, crazy-over-his-stepdaughter stepdad.

Never a good father. Because he never saw it as something necessary.

Chameleon never had any power except his shifting personality. So he gained people's trust and sucked secrets off them. And when he needed them to do something, he used those secrets to his own advantage. That was how he survived.

He taught his survival skills to me when I was seven. At then, I viewed it as a little game. Hearing a secret gave my seven-year-old self a small happiness, because I didn't even know what they were going to be about.

When Chameleon brought me to his friend's-- a famous movie director-- house, I looked around it as if under a spell. A big, shiny house with stairs and so many rooms that I lost count. The man gave me a dazzling smile, and introduced me to his son, Jambu. He was a few years older than me. He squirmed under his father's hand, which I couldn't understand.

After a while, two women arrived, and both men's face lighted up. Chameleon was staring at a red-haired woman, and I could tell-- even then-- that he was planning something. After her came a girl a little taller than me. "Scarlet would be delighted to meet Peril. I heard Peril's first in her grade, so she will have no problem catching up with an older girl. Right, girls?"

Scarlet quickly turned to me with narrowed eyes. "Of course." Then she eyed Chameleon, and then me. "Hey, Chameleon."

"Hey, little angel." Chameleon lifted her up and ran in circles-- something he had never done to me. "How have you been, you troublemaker?"

The woman next to Scarlet's mother was Anaconda-- I had seen her on TV. She stood there, her lips pressed together. It was an expression that I had never seen on TV. Her husband tried to reach for her hand, but when she snatched it away, he gave an exasperated sigh. "Chameleon, let's go to my study to talk."

Chameleon set Scarlet down, and Scarlet gave me a look that said, *see? I don't know who you are, but he likes me more.* It made me jealous, but also a little superior, because I knew it was all an act.

Finally, Chameleon turned to me. "Peril, go and play with Jambu and Scarlet. Father's going to talk to his friend in his study, okay?"

"Okay!"

Chameleon was looking at the man and Anaconda, back and forth, as if trying to catch something. *A secret?* I wanted to know, too.

After an hour of playing with Scarlet-- and concluding that she had some sort of narcissism (although I didn't know the exact word back then)-- I tried to look for Chameleon because I really wanted to go home.

A room with a locked door soon came into sight, and I could hear voices. That was when I remembered what Chameleon said about secrets, and decided to eavesdrop.

"Anaconda has been like that ever since the car accident couple years ago." A huge sigh. *What accident?* "How dare she be mad at me when she doesn't even know what I did? The nerve! With Jambu, too. Of course she's almost never home to take care of him. And can you believe it? They had a *child*. A little girl."

"God, I never saw Anaconda that way. If my wife did such a thing...You're a saint to keep her as a wife. But it's necessary, seeing

Jambu's age..."

"I know! In my crazy moments, I thought about killing her. But then, what would happen to our reputation? To Jambu? And I hate myself for saying this, but I still love her, Chameleon, my God." Silence. The words about killing surprised me, but I still listened. "If I can't kill her, I thought, who can I kill? That man. And I know some people that does those kinds of things, and they got the job done. It was clean and fast, they framed it like a natural accident. All it took was a little bit of money." A crazed laughter.

"Who are they?" I couldn't see Chameleon's face, but I could imagine it, hiding that little smile behind all his fake colors. "Interesting, I've never heard of such things..."

"A woman named Battlewinner. A crazy bitch."

"What happened to the daughter? How old is she?"

"Close to your daughter's age. Maybe the same. I don't know, Anaconda keeps her so secret. I only knew she existed when she moved to Grandeur's house. I can't kill a girl, could I?" He snorted. "I thought about it. But then, it would be too suspicious. Anaconda would immediately think that I did something. So I did something else."

*Close to my age.* I could hear my heart beating. *Thump.*

"What did you do?"

*Thump.*

"Anaconda is a woman that's obsessed with her status. She would hesitate to tell people that she cheated. She would be scared to reveal the girl. And if it's a girl with cancer? She wouldn't even think about it."

*Thump.*

"Cancer? What do you mean? The child has cancer?"

*Thump.*

"I ordered Battlewinner to inject the girl with cancer cells a couple years ago. It's revealing now."

"How do you know?" Chameleon seemed amused.

*He's talking about a girl in my age. Being injected with cancer cells. Sounding amused.*

*What if that was me? Would he sound the same?*

"I contact someone that works in Grandeur's house. A little money and she tells me everything. It's almost funny."

*Thump.*

That was when I ran away. I couldn't bear to hear it anymore. The secret was nothing like what I had imagined, and I felt abrupt fear at the world for not being what it used to be. That my father was nothing like what I father should be.

A few months later, he would announce that his marriage to Scarlet's mother. He got richer and richer-- probably by threatening people to reveal their secrets. After all, he always recorded his conversations that he shared with his closest friends. Anaconda's husband, no doubt, was probably one of them.

Soon, he replaced Scarlet with me, and I was always overshadowed by her. Following her like a servant, doing whatever she wanted me to do. Never saying a word.

I had also become a chameleon. Hoping that Scarlet would drop me a secret. Hoping to someday have power over her. Throwing everything important to me away in the process, just like my father.

☆

☆Greatness☆

I had been a chameleon all my life, hiding underneath my mother's shadow, closing my eyes, changing color whenever I saw something horrible.

I had not been a brave person wanting to face the world's cruelty from the start. I was part of it. Or worse, I was just watching, unable to do anything because I was afraid for my life.

But one day, I heard Battlewinner asking about "cancer cell injection". The man replied that it had been successfully done. Curious, I mustered up the courage to speak to my mother. I thought about which voice would please her the most. Shifting colors as a chameleon, I asked her in a weak, timid voice: "What was that about?"

She seemed slightly surprised, but that expression turned into a sneer. "You're finally talking to me? Are you done viewing me as a monster?"

For killing my father? *Yes.*

When I didn't reply, she looked at me straight into the eye, daring at me to look away. I did. "One of our clients ordered us to inject cancer cells into a five year old. He wants her dead. We think it worked." My hands started trembling. "What a pity, isn't it? That could have been you. If you haven't been my daughter. If you had been weaker."

All my life, when there were terrible things happening around me, I could just shake it off. Thinking, *I'll never go through that. It isn't my problem.*

But this made me realize that it could have been me. And I could suddenly imagine it happening to me-- the horror. *What if the girl doesn't even know?* The realization that this wasn't just murder-- it was horrible cruelty. Destroying someone's life before they even had a chance to live through it. It was so sudden, so monstrous, that it brought tears to my eyes.

"If someone asked you to do that to me," I asked quietly. Holding my hands so that it wouldn't tremble anymore. "Would you have done it?"

*Say you wouldn't.*

But she had already killed my father. What was holding her back? Her last conscience? But if she had any, she woudln't-- couldn't-- have killed him.

Battlewinner didn't look at me, and a long silence ensued. Finally, she answered. "Yes. If they offered me enough money."

That day, I realized that I didn't want to be be still anymore. I would declare war on every cruelty that existed in this world. I would no longer trying live quietly, shifting my colors until I blended and nobody noticed me. I would never be a chameleon again. I would destroy those who harmed others.

The first thing I did after that was betraying my mother.

# [34] Childhood Lovers

☆Glory☆

*"I have endured what no one on earth has ever done before--*

*I put my lips the hands of the man who killed my son."*

*-The Iliad*

Even when I was younger, I knew my father wasn't the kind to crash into a tree. Especially with a friend's car. Because we were too poor to have a car on our own, he often borrowed a car from one of his friends. He was always careful in those cars, driving as slowest as he can. That's one of the things I remember about him. So, in the back of my mind, I considered murder a possibility. There was a fire. What if he was poisoned? Or if something caused him to do it?

Or maybe, he had killed himself. Because he was miserable with his life with me.

The only good thing about his death was that I would never know if it was indeed a suicide. Because then, I would have to blame myself for the pain I went through. And as much as I told myself that couldn't be the case, the thought always bothered me in the back of my mind.

And then, Deathbringer told me what happened.

It's been a week since Deathbringer talked to me. A week, and so much things happened. The doctors realized that there was no treatment existing for me. Anaconda visited again, and we talked longer. Even grandmother sat next to us, although she didn't say a word to Anaconda. My friends visited. I realized that I wanted to kill Deathbringer.

"When you told me about what you did, I couldn't sleep." I say those words as fast as I can the moment he opens the door. I'm almost

afraid he won't let me in. "I thought about it over and over again. About what I should do. But Deathbringer, I realized that I'm dying. You know? In a way, I can do anything I want." I take a deep breath, staring at him in the eye. "So, I came here to kill you."

Deathbringer stares at me for a moment, then gives me a bittersweet smile. "Okay. Come in."

I flinch. "Don't say that word." Then I realize, that okay was never our always. Because now, there can't be an always. Because we both crushed it into pieces.

Deathbringer nods, his smile thinning into a straight line. He closes the door behind him, and I walk in naturally. I hate my body for being immediately relaxed, because I've been to this place more than a hundred times. I realize that this is the boy that killed my father, and I force myself to look back. Just in case he stabs me.

When I look back, Deathbringer is just turning from the door. He realizes why I'm staring at him, and looks genuinely hurt. "I'll go first, if you're worried."

"I'm not wo--" Then I stop. Because I have no reason to say otherwise. "I am. Because you're a murderer."

I had a plan of sitting down and calmly talking to him. And killing him somehow.

*Slap.*

Deathbringer stare at the ground, and I can't even see a red mark. My hand stings. It makes me furious, how I want to hurt him and end up hurting myself instead. He doesn't meet my eyes. He doesn't seem afraid. He only tries to reach out his hand, and when I immediately draw back, he lets them fall to his sides. "Glory, please stop. You're going to get bruises on your hand."

"Go fuck yourself."

He just stands there without moving. He almost seems lifeless, his eyes fixated in the floor. "Glory, if you want me dead, I can do it myself. I'll do it tonight. Just-- don't be here. Ok-- alright? Please."

I flinch, and I stare at him. I know I told him I wanted to kill him. And I do. I want to destroy this boy in front of me. But the fact that he's so willing, that he would do it himself-- it's too much to bear. "No."

"Do you want to do it?" He sounds pained, and he finally looks at me, flinching when he looks at my eyes. *Is it because it's the same color as my fathers?* His face says it all. *Yes.* When I don't reply, he walks toward the kitchen. I know I should be worried that he might do something to me, like stab me with a knife. *He's a murderer.* The thing that makes me angry is that I'm not. I just know that he won't do any of those things. He returns with a small bottle in his hand.

"This is poison that my mother keeps under the sink. If you want to be here when I drink it, I don't mind. I guarantee it'll kill me." A pause. "If I don't, you can always take a knife from the kitchen."

"You're lying," I accuse, snatching the bottle away from him. I don't know why. I convince myself that it's because I have to check what it is. "You're planning to poison me. You're going to kill me like you killed my dad."

"I'm not." His voice is quiet. "Give me the bottle, Glory."

"Don't say my name." I don't even know what to do with it. I don't know why I came here. I just hate him and I hate myself. I thought I wanted to kill him, but the thought that he'll die in front me terrifies me. "Okay. Okay. Just do it tonight or something. When I'm not here. Or just leave this house so I can never see you again. Maybe I'll leave." I'm saying nonsense now, turning back and running towards the door, the poison in my pocket.

"Leave the poison." Deathbringer's voice calls out.

I reach for the door in silence, and then suddenly face him. He's standing where he was before. I realize that no, death won't hurt him enough. This will. "My dad used to really like cars." I can already see the pain in his eyes. "Did you know? The car he rode on that day was his friend's. That's why I thought it was strange that he died in a car crash. Crashing into a tree. Can you believe that? He always drove so carefully." Tears are swelling in my eyes. "I thought

he committed suicide because he hated me."

Deathbringer just stares at me, taking the information in. He's already crying, those disgusting silent tears falling from his face, leaving streaks that shine in the lighting. I continue. "Because he somehow knew I had cancer, which of course he didn't. Or maybe I wasn't pretty enough. Maybe I cried too much. Maybe I asked him too many times about where my mother went."

Deathbringer just silently shakes his head.

"I was miserable. I cried everyday, I refused to talk to even Grandmother. And then you came and asked me if I wanted to be friends with you. Do you remember? I thought I was the--" I cut myself off. *Luckiest girl in the world. Because I had found my soulmate. Later, the love of my life.*

"Deathbringer." I lean on the door, not quite watching him. I'm just looking at something, far away. "Deathbringer." I call out his name, realizing once more that no, I don't hate it. It just doesn't seem like a name of a person that killed my father. It seems like another person entirely. "Why does it have to be you? Why is it my father that you killed? If only..." My voice fades away, because I know it's impossible. "In the hospital, I told you that the murder you committed was okay, before you told me it was my dad. I thought about it a lot. I said you were only a kid, and you didn't want to. That everyone around you had made you do it."

I slide down to the floor, sitting on the cool floor, brushing it with my fingers. I stare at him, directly. "But it is your fault. In the end, the person that made the choice was yourself. It can never be excused. The pain you caused my dad. Me. Grandmother. Anaconda." His friends. His co-workers. Everyone that cried during the funeral. The people that couldn't sleep during the night.

Deathbringer covers his face, his knees on the floor. His head tilted downwards, his fingers hiding the face of a crying boy. The fact that those fingers once pulled a trigger that ended a life just seems so foreign to me.

"But the funny thing is, we're only a couple of kids. Isn't that funny?

We're still in high school. We don't know anything about the world. And I feel so sorry for the both of us." Pause. I hesitate to continue, but I know that I must tell him. "Because we really loved each other, Deathbringer."

I take the bottle from my pocket and roll it to him. He doesn't even see it. He's finally crying out, sobbing, screaming. He screams and screams and screams. I don't know who he's screaming towards. Maybe me, for saying all those things to him. Maybe the soul of my dead father. Maybe his mother, because that's the reason he did what I did. Probably, though, to himself.

"I can't kill you." My mouth is moving on its own. I stare at him, and I realize that yes, I can't kill him. Not even if he threatens to kill me, right this moment. I have torn my soul for him a little too much.

"I love you," I whisper. "I know you killed my father, I know you destroyed my life, but I still love you. I'm a monster." I'm starting to cry myself. Yes. It seems like I just can't get over this boy, no matter what happens. Maybe it's the fault of our stars, Deathbringer and I. "I want you to stay. Can you believe that? I don't want you to die."

"Glory, you can't." Deathbringer shakes his head, and I walk up to him. His voice is hoarse. "We can't. I have to die. I have to pay for what I did." His voice cracks. "Your father keeps appearing in my dreams."

I don't know what to say. I don't even know if my father forgave Deathbringer about what he did. I just know that I can't say anything that isn't true. "I don't know how he felt." That's all I can tell him. Deathbringer nods miserably.

"Maybe, if we had more time, we could have figured things out..." My voice fades away. "But I'm dying. And right now, all I know is that I want you here. With me."

I slowly walk towards him, and for a moment he looks like he would back away. But he stays, his face pale and flushed. I raise my hand, and although I do it as gently as possible, Deathbringer flinches. I place my hand on his hand, taking his fingers to my lips.

The fingers that pulled the trigger, long ago. The fingers that destroyed everybody around us and even us ourselves. And, eventually, I replace his hand with his lips.

I don't know if what we're doing is right. I don't know what others would have chosen in my position. I just wanted to kiss him, to forget. To make us feel comforted even for a short time. After Deathbringer told me about what he did, my mind and body were saying two different things. But at that moment, pressing my self to him, they are one.

We sit there for a long time. Sighing at the cruel world. We're not happy-- we can't be, not in this situation-- but we are content.

I don't know what to call us. The murderer and the dying girl. Two high schoolers with problems. Kids caught in the wrong situation, caught in the wrong world, wrong fate. I think for hours, silent, about what our names should be.

I settle with childhood lovers.

☆

**I really hesitated a lot about writing an actual Glorybringer scene (the first draft was way more depressing) because I'm not sure if anyone would be like this in a similar situation. But, heck, this is a glorybringer story, and after those long chapters, people deserve a kiss between the two main characters lmao. Thank you for anyone that puts up with this crap.**

# PART 4

*"You said I killed you—haunt me, then!*

*The murdered do haunt their murderers, I believe. (..)*

*Be with me always - take any form - drive me mad! only do not leave me in this abyss, where I cannot find you!*

*Oh, God! it is unutterable!  I cannot live without my life! I can not live without my soul!"*

*— Emily Brontë, Wuthering Heights*

# [35] Pretend Game

☆Glory☆

*"You are all the colors in one, at full brightness."*

*-Jennifer Niven, All the Bright Places*

☆

There's a dark mist over our love, the whisper of doom. Maybe that's what makes it thrilling, the fact that this is all going to end tragically. That yes, this is going to end, that this moment will never come again. It's a love destined to destroy both of us.

*Tonight, you're not Deathbringer. Tonight, I'm not Glory. We're two different people. This is a pretend love game.* It seems like an unspoken promise between the two of us.

I'm losing myself in this game, giving him everything. Deathbringer, on the other hand, is holding back slightly. His fingers are hesitant, afraid of touching me. So I take control, holding his hands against my face, making sure that he never lets go. It's my first kiss-- ever-- and I'm sure I'm doing it wrong. Convinced that he has done this many times with girls way better than me. But I go on anyway. I try to take him in, the things that were locked away from me for all those years. I take my hands from his and run them through his hair, against his neck, pressing him closer to me.

I can feel him breathing against me, the small thumping of his heart against my hand. Everything about him makes me forget who we are, where I am.

Deathbringer slowly becomes more and more open-- he wraps his hands around my waist, holding me closer. His lips brush over not just my lips but over my forehead, my nose, my eyes, my cheeks,

my jaw. They slowly find their way back to me. For the first time, it occurs to me that maybe he might want me as much as I want him. That he has longed for me like I have longed for him, all this time.

Unlike me, Deathbringer knows what he's doing. Our soft kiss gets deeper, and I give up trying to do anything and just follow him along. His face is tilting a little to the side, and I breathe heavily against him. All I can do is hope that this will never stop. There's no sound except the sound of my heart beating, clear and loud.

He gently pulls back, and my stomach drops. But when his eyes flutter open-- his dark, dark eyes-- they are not accusing. They are just staring softly, apparently asking me a question.

*Okay?*

I give him a small smile and just close my eyes.

*Okay.*

His lips find my lips. His fingers find my fingers.

☆

"I started liking you when we went to middle school."

I'm resting my face on Deathbringer's legs, watching Gone with the Wind together. But neither of us are looking at the TV-- it's just a small noise in the background. Scarlett is screaming about something, but we are just staring at each other.

"Why?"

I consider his question for a second. Wondering if I should tell him about the drown incident. I decide against it. "I mean, there wasn't a particular boom, I guess. Like, it wasn't due to this one big incident. You just kind of slowly drew me in. Ever since we met." As I say it, I realize that this is also true. Can a person really start to like a person after one little thing? Without either of us knowing, Deathbringer was drawing me in. He was just that sort of a person. Perhaps from the very first day we met. I suddenly feel embarrassed, so I turn and stare at the TV screen a little harder,

refusing to look at his face.

"I win, then. I liked you ever since we started elementary school."

I turn to look at him accusingly. "That's just a lie. Remember when you would come over to my house everyday and just talk about your girlsfriends for three hours?"

He laughs softly. "That was me trying to see if it made you jealous. None of them did." I look at him, surprised, only to realize that he's the one avoiding looking at me. Even in our little game, he seems unable to get rid of his conscience completely. Apparently he can't forget who we are, what he did. Unlike me. I'm good at pretending.

"It worked. I started being jealous when you dated Greatness." I despately wish that he would forget everything. Because tonight, that's better for both him and me. I don't have to hate him. He doesn't have to hate himself. I nudge him further. "You seemed to like Greatness, unlike your other girlfriends."

He snorts. "We broke up because I kept putting you over her." I don't know what to say. It's a mixed feeling-- sorry for Greatness, because I could tell she genuinely liked Deathbringer, and this small feeling of haughty pride.

I'm a little afraid to ask, but it comes out anyway. "Why did you like me?"

He doesn't even stop to think, like the answer is written on the back of his hand. "You seemed bitter, like me. You looked like you knew something about the world around us. You didn't fall to my fake personality. That's when I wanted to become friends with you." He's still not looking at me. "After that, I found out that you were a strong person, way stronger than me. I always tried to protect you from everything-- from the other kids, from your disease, from your mom. But in the end, you were the one keeping me safe." He considers for a moment. "From me, I guess. Because the things I did were enough to drive a kid insane."

Silence. There's that guilty look in his eyes again, that misery. I think for a second, and realize that yes, this is the time to tell him.

He's being honest with me, and I should be, too. If I don't tell him now, I realize, I might never have the chance. "You saved my life. When we were going to the field trip."

He seems genuinely surprised. "What?"

"You know that one time we went to the ocean for the field trip? It was in sixth or seventh grade. At that time, my mother made a new movie. It was her most popular one yet. In interviews on YouTube, she seemed way happier than me. Grandmother cried on every other day. I decided to kill myself by drowning and frame it as an accident."

He's just staring at me, unable to say anything. I can tell that he's shocked, so I just continue. "I actually went pretty deep. Remember? Everyone around me was playing and didn't even notice." I suddenly feel bitter. "Nobody was even slightly interested in me. I was pretty much hated in elementary school, remember?"

Deathbringer starts to protest, but I go on. "You did. You told an adult about it. You came and saved me."

He has that sad look on his face again. "It was the least I could do."

"Thinking about it, I always got help from you every time. When I was being bullyed by big fourth graders in elementary school. You punched him, remember? When I was drowning, you came to save me. When I didn't have a partner for a group project, you always chose me. I don't know. Those little things."

He just nods, a small smile on his face. I suddenly feel the urge to dive deeper into this pretend game again.

"When we go to college, we should bully the professor together." I don't know what makes me say it. Perhaps it's the side effect of the game. It's giving me too much hope, making me forget reality a little too much. Maybe that's why I can't stop. "We'll eat lunch together in the cafeteria, and take some same classes so if one of us doze off, the other person can wake them up. We can stay up in the library together writing essays."

Everything I say will never come true.

But today, I ignore it. Because in our little game, everything is possible.

Maybe Deathbringer has the same thought in mind. "What if we go to different colleges?"

I consider it. "If we go to different colleges, I'm going to send you a letter. Not an email. I've always wanted to send letters to my boyfriend far away." I close my eyes quickly because I can guess what kind of look Deathbringer has on his face.

Deathbringer doesn't say anything for a long time, but finally replies: "I'm not sure how to write one. You should give me one first, and I'll reply." His fingers reach my forehead, my closed eyes, and my lips. It's so comforting that I start to wish that he'll never stop.

"I'm going to use the best paper in the country." I go on imagining. "I'll write in ink. Cursive, because that's more romantic than my usual crappy handwriting. I'll sign it...How should I sign it?"

"Love, Glory?" He suggests. His voice starts to fade, and I realize that I'm tired. But I try to fight it, because I know I don't have much time left and I don't want to waste a second of it. "Your girlfriend, Glory? Your Majesty, Glory?" I laugh a little on the last one.

"That's boring." His hands are now brushing my hair, leaving an electric flash at their touch. "Something cool. Something only you know. Like an inside joke." The moment I say it, I realize what I should do immediately. "Okay. I'll sign it okay. That's our little word." My voice becomes a mumble as I start to doze off.

I can tell Deathbringer is smiling. "Okay."

I began to hope that this pretend game will go on forever. That I'll never be Glory and Deathbringer will never be Deathbringer. That this is a world where I'm not dying and Deathbringer hasn't killed a person in his life.

Reality, however, never lets us roam free for long.

☆

**This is the first and last Glorybringer chapter in this story I'm sorry--**

# [36] Crime and Punishment

☆Deathbringer☆

*"If he has a conscience  he will suffer for his mistake.  That will be his punishment-  as well as the prison."*

--Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Crime and Punishment

☆

*I am a little boy, watching Quickstrike wash and clean the big house. To me, she is a deadly, talented assassin that can earn all the money in the world. To the world, however, she is only a high school graduate.*

*During the night, she brings middle-aged men to our house. They have many things in common: they are slightly drunk and never come back. Some of them have rings on their fourth finger, but my mother doesn't seem to mind. They change once a week. I can tell that she doesn't like any of them, but if they like her, they buy her presents. Mother sells those presents and pays our bills. It is just enough to pay our rent.*

*I hate all of it.*

*"If we go to Battlewinner," I mumble one day, as she is cleaning, "She'll give me money. Maybe she'll give me one more target, but the money she'll give me will be enough for us to live an year without you working."*

*Mother turns to me and slaps me in the face. I stare at her, shocked and furious. My face is tingling with pain, but I don't even mind it. We stare at each other in silence for a couple seconds. After that, Mother opens her mouth, her face contorted in disgust."You're a monster."*

*It's one thing to know you're a monster. For Battlewinner to say I'm a monster. When my mother says it, however, it's enough to make my heart drop.*

*Even I-- a boy that killed two people-- am a kid, and I just stand there until tears are dripping down my face. I clench my fists, and I see*

*Mother flinch, even though I have no intents to hurt her. The fact she does makes me even more miserable. "I know." I'm sobbing now, my entire body shaking. "I know that better than anyone, Mother."*

*She suddenly comes to me and drops to her knees, her hands gripping my shoulders tightly. There are tears in her eyes. "I'm sorry, child. You're not. Of course you're not." She presses her face to my chest, and I can feel it becoming wet. "I'm the monster. You've done nothing wrong."*

*"I just don't want you to do any hard work," I tell her, gripping her shirt so she doesn't let go. "I don't like the men you bring to our house. I know you don't like doing it." I try to wipe my tears, but they keep coming. "The people Battlewinner order me to kill mean nothing to me. If it makes you comfortable, I can do anything..."*

*Mother shakes her head. "You have to stop thinking like that, Deathbringer." She stares at me in the eye. She reaches out, gently, and wipes my tears away. It's the first time she has touched my face for months. Everyday, she becomes a little further away. She keeps making the distance between us bigger. As if she's scared of me. "The gun you point to someone else is destined to come back to you somehow. Taking someone's life-- you have to pay for it dearly. It's not so simple."*

*"I don't understand," I say. You're the only person in the world that makes me kill other people. Just to keep you safe. To keep in that small veil, so you don't have to face the world like I do. "I don't even know those people."*

*Mother just shook her head, taking her hands away. Staring at me with a sad look on her face. "I'm sorry."*

*She repeated it, over and over.  LIke I was an already ruined being, with no hope of turning back. After that, she never touched me or came close to me. She kept her distance, watching me as if I would begin to assassinate everyone.*

*Perhaps she was right. Maybe I was too broken to even hope of recovery.*

☆

After Glory goes home, hell starts. Our dream is shattered, and I fall

into that deep hole again, hating myself. Whenever I close my eyes, I see that man's green, green eyes. They now overlap with Glory's.

When Mother comes home, I'm sobbing uncontrollably.

I can tell that Mother is surprised-- I'm almost always never like this. I hug my knees, rocking myself back and forth. "Mother, what do I do?"

She comes to me and hesitates, as if she isn't sure what to do. Maybe she's thinking about hugging me-- she is in front of me, her arms open wide-- but we haven't hugged for years and I can tell that it's awkward for her. "What's wrong, Deathbringer?"

"You were right." Oh, God, you were so right. "Everything comes back after all."

I look up at her. Although I can't see her expression clearly because of the tears, I can tell that she understands. Her voice is suddenly sharp. "Have you killed someone new?"

Maybe it's the sharpness in her voice. Maybe it's Glory, who kissed me despite knowing what I did. Maybe it's just me going crazy with guilt and shame. "NO!" I scream at her. She flinches back, and suddenly I want to run away from her. *You're my mom. You're supposed to love me, not scared of me. You're supposed to know that I'll never kill someone ever again.*

"I haven't killed anyone other than you already know," I say bitterly, my entire body shaking. "I know you're always scared of me, and that's why you never let me cook. Because you're afraid I'll poison you. Or why you lock your door at night." My voice breaks. "Because you're afraid I'll *kill you*."

Every time I killed, it was for Mother. But by doing it, I have turned her against me. It makes me laugh, bitterly. Was any of it worth it?"

"That isn't true," Mother immediately says, but she avoids looking at me.

"Don't lie," I spit at her. "You don't trust me. You think I'm a monster." Suddenly, I want to hurt her, for her to pay for the pain

she has caused me all those years. "Battlewinner treated me better than you. At least she wasn't afraid of me. She-- she understood me."

My words are poison, and I can tell that she is stung. It makes me immediately regret it.

She pauses for a second, unable to say anything. When she speaks again, her voice is soft and in control. "Maybe partly, you're right. I am a little scared of you. Terrified might be the right word. But it's not about who you are, it's about me and my fears. It's a force of habit. The education I got. To be doubt everyone around me." When I frown at her, accusing, she shakes her head. "To be completely honest, what Battlewinner said of you scared me. She never said such things about anyone. It made me a little scared of you." When I grimace, she covers her face with her hands. "I'm a horrible parent. All I give you is pain."

I stare at the ground. "I'm never going to kill another person, ever again. Even for you." Mother reaches for me, but I jerk away. I can tell that she is hurt by it, but right now I'm too angry at her. And this is what she has been doing to me, all those years-- avoiding.

Mother looks at me, surprised. I have never said anything like this. "What made you change your mind?" When I don't reply, she presses her hand to my cheek, despite my protests. Her hands are hardened with rough work. "Why were you crying, Deathbringer?"

I realize right then: I have to tell her. I have to tell someone. Someone that understands. "Do you remember the man I killed? The one that was driving?" Saying it alone makes me want to throw up. I'm already shivering.

Mother nods solemnly. She knows not to interrupt. "He turned out to be my friend's father." I can feel the tears coming again. All my life I've trained myself to not to cry in front of Mother, because it'll only worry her. Or maybe that was one of the reasons why she thinks I'm a sociopath. But that's not true-- I do feel pain and sadness. A little too much. "You were right. I was pointing that gun to myself." I'm sobbing. "I just wanted to protect you. And me. But I destroyed my friend's life. And I love her, Mother. I've loved her

ever since we met."

Mother suddenly wraps her arms around me. I cry even louder and bury my face to her chest. This time, I'm the one wetting her sweater with my tears. "He keeps appearing in my dreams. He always has, but now it's more frequent. And he... he turns into my friend, and when I pull the trigger, she--" I stop there. I can't say more. I just shake against her, my heart thumping loudly. "What do I do?"

Mother doesn't ask any questions, although she must be surprised. Maybe a little scared, because the fact I told someone about the organization itself means we're in danger. Although it disappeared after Battlewinner died, there are other dangerous people. "Did you tell the girl?" Mother asks softly.

After a moment, I nod. "I told her everything. I just had to. I kept it from her all this time, but...it just came out."

"You did the right thing." She strokes my hair, her voice lowering down to a whisper. Then her grip becomes tighter around me. "I'm sorry for making you go through this." Her voice is shaking slightly. *Stop.* "If I had been a normal parent, you would have never..."

"What should I do, Mother?" I look up at her. "I can't stand myself. Whenever I see her..." I grip my hair, covering my face with my hands. "I want to destroy everyone that has caused her pain, only to realize that it's me...What should I do? What *can* I do?"

Mother watches me in silence. She untangles my hands from my hair, holding it to her cheek. As if it's the most precious thing in the world. Even this soft treatment makes me miserable, because I know that I don't deserve it. "You're young and you've gone through so much," she replies. "Deathbringer, there's only one way to make yourself feel better. Not enough to make you happy, or the way it was before. But maybe just enough to bear it out."

"What is it?" I can feel the desperation in my voice. Mother's cheeks are wet with tear marks.

"Deathbringer." She kisses my forehead, and I realize how long I

have longed for her to embrace me like this. To feel her love. It's the last thing I hold on to. "There's only one way. Turn yourself in. You have done the crime. Face the punishment that follows your actions." Her hand squeezes mine. "I'll be with you."

☆

# [37] Peril

✯Glory✯

When I come back home in a taxi, someone is waiting for me in the kitchen.

Greatness.

She keeps staring at Secretkeeper, as if she can't help it. Moon seems to have noticed this, and kind of shields her mother protectively, a confused look on her face. Secretkeeper is frozen in place, her fingers barely touching the tea she probably intended to give Greatness.

"Greatness," I say, surprised. I look back and forth between Greatness and Moon, wondering if they have some kind of history. But that's almost impossible.

"Glory, I have something important to tell you. I— I must." She immediately stands up, her eyes fixed pointedly on me. She turns and looks at Moon one last time, as if unconsciously drawn to her, and finally focuses on me instead, deciding that what she must say to me is a little bit more important. It makes me curious.

Grandmother is waiting for me, and she immediately comes to me, worried. She seems paler than ever, and I realize that I have been putting too much weight on her shoulders all this time. "Where have you been, Glory? You know you shouldn't be roaming around, child. You should be in bed getting some rest."

*Resting doesn't stop me from dying,* I want to tell her, but I know she deserves better from me. Grandmother deserves a better granddaughter than I would ever be. "I will, I promise. I slept a little at Deathbringer's house. I'm feeling fine." The truth is, my legs are shaking from tiredness. I can tell that Grandmother doesn't believe me. But she doesn't say anything, because she's afraid of stressing me. Or maybe she too knows, deep inside, that rest won't

do much for me now.

"I'll run away as soon as I had a minute of talk with her," assures Greatness' smooth voice, although Grandmother isn't convinced. "I just had to come and see her. Maybe it was too selfish of me."

Now I feel for sure: Greatness has something to say to me. Something very important.

"Should we go to my room? I think I have to lie down a little," I offer, and Greatness nods. "Grandmother, this is Greatness, one of my friends from school."

"Glory should be getting rest, not visits," Grandmother starts to protest.

"I'll kick her out of my room if I start to get tired,"

"It'll be a short meeting, ma'am," Greatness tells her. "I promise to not tire Glory." She isn't looking at me but staring at the floor.

"Greatness-!" Secretkeeper gasps out. I turn to her in surprise, and I can tell Grandmother does, too. She has never sounded like that, for the many years I have known her. "After you talk." She chokes on her words, and her hands are shaking more than ever. "After that, will you come down and— let me explain— the thing you— you said—"

"If you want," Greatness replies carelessly, coldly. I am shocked at the tone of her voice. She nods to me. "You look tired, Glory, let's hurry to your room."

When we reach my room, I immediately grab her. "Why is Secretkeeper acting like that in front of you?"

She gently leads me to my bed, ignoring my question. "I came here to tell you something very important, something I swore to never tell you. But— I don't know, you don't seem to be in a good state, maybe I should come later..."

"Don't change the subject." I'm angry, staring at her in disbelief. "What did you say to Secretkeeper, Greatness? She's like my family,

if you insulted her—"

The thing I see on Greatness' face angers me even more. It's pity. I know it better than anything— it's the face of someone that is keeping a secret from me, for my own good. Her expression mirrors Deathbringer's during all those months. "Glory, that's related to the thing that I must tell you."

"Why—" Suddenly, the door bangs open. I can hear Grandmother's voice, ordering her to come down at once, but it's all drowned out when Peril shuts the door behind her, blocking it with her entire body, as if afraid that someone would drag her out.

I have always found Peril's blue eyes unsettling, but now they look a little crazed.

Greatness seems the most surprised of all. "We were in middle of a conversation, Pe—"

Peril doesn't even look at her. She's staring at me, at my shallow cheeks, the dark circles under my eyes, my thin arms. She's trembling all over, her face red from running.

Why? Why would Peril come to me? She didn't come when Clay visited me in the hospital. Is it because of pity? But we barely know each other. I decide that her love for Clay has awoken some sort of brain fever.

"I have to talk to her first. I have to." She clenches her fists at her sides. "If I have to wait for another minute, I'll just go home, I know it, I'll be too scared to do it again. Please. I have something important to say to Glory."

Greatness seems annoyed, distressed even. As she opens her mouth to say something, the door opens, revealing Secretkeeper. Peril almost shouts out in fright. She sets down a tray of cookies and turns, with hesitation, at Greatness. "Miss Glory seems to have another visitor. Maybe we can have a talk first?" I try to catch her eyes, but she won't look at me.

Greatness glares at her, her lips turning into a sneer. I almost jump

out of my bed in my urge to punch her. "If you look at Secretkeeper that way again, Greatness, I will—" I cut off when I see Secretkeeper's expression. It's full of pain and guilt— she's barely meeting my eyes.

Greatness sighs. "You two have a talk, then." She stands up and leads both herself and Secretkeeper out of the room. "Remember that there's something very important that I must tell you, Glory. Something about *Secretkeeper*, too." The last thing I see before the door closes is Secretkeeper flinching at those words.

I turn, almost irritably, to Peril. "What do you want to tell me?" I swear to myself that if it's anything close to *get well soon*, I would chuck her out of this house.

She stares at me but doesn't stare at me, her eyes bolting here and there, to the floor, to the ceiling, to the chair on her right and the desk on her left. Finally, they focus on me and me alone. "I promised myself that I would take this secret to my grave. But you — you are dying, and I—"

I stare at her in disbelief. I have no idea why she is acting like this. "You came here to tell me that Scarlet actually doesn't want to kill me or something like that?"

"No!" Peril takes a deep breath. When she speaks again, it's more calm. "I'm not Scarlet's slave. I used to be, but not anymore. I can think for myself, and say what's right, and..." She shakes her head. "Glory, I came here to tell you about a conversation my dad and your stepfather had when I was younger."

I frown. "My stepfather? How— how do you know him?" There's no way, but if Clay didn't, how could Peril know? "Clay told you?"

"Leave him out of this," Peril says sharply. "The day he went to the hospital to visit you, I actually went, too. I didn't tell him, though, because I wanted to surprise him, and I was a little late buying you a small gift."

"But you never came to visit me," I tell her. I don't know why she's telling me this. Maybe she came all the way here just to make me

say *thank you*. "Unless I was sleeping."

"Because I never went in. That day, I saw a woman, a brown haired woman, and although she didn't have blonde hair, I knew it was Anaconda." I jolt at the name. "She was fighting with a man, and I knew him too. Her husband. People were beginning to stare at them, and she suddenly burst into tears, hitting him in the chest, saying that you— you were her daughter."

Anaconda did that? When she visited me, she never seemed to show much of an emotion. slowly match the pieces together— if Peril was able to recognize Anaconda and her husband despite the wigs and heavy makeup, it means she must be a fan. The reason why she came here— "You wanted to talk to Anaconda through me?"

Peril looks at me like I'm the stupidest person in the world. "What are you talking about?" She shakes her head furiously. "The thing is, are you really her daughter? Her only daughter?"

So what if Peril spreads it on the Internet? What if, in doing so, she manages to bring a backlash on Anaconda? But, no matter what I tell myself, it seems that they are all lies. I do care. "How are you sure that it was them?"

Peril doesn't answer; she just covers her face with her hands. When she speaks, her voice is muffled. "Oh my God. You are her daughter."

"You are insane—"

"Listen to me, listen to me, Glory, without interrupting. Okay? Listen. If you stop me, I won't be able to say what I wanted to say. I know Anaconda when I see her, not because I'm a fan, but because I have seen her before, at one of her houses. Close to this one. I don't remember the address, but it was very big. Two or three stories high. When everyone went out to play— including Scarlet, Scarlet was there, too— I went to the study to find my dad. He's a close friend of your stepfather's. At least, he used to be." A crazed laughter. "And the man told my dad— that Anaconda was cheating."

It doesn't make sense.

"That she had a daughter. He wanted to kill Anaconda, he said, but he was afraid for their reputation, and he— he still loved her. So he killed the thing that he could kill— 'that man,' he told my dad. I still remember it so clearly. He knew some people that did that sort of stuff for him. A-And he wanted to kill the daughter, too, but he was afraid of making it too obvious, that Anaconda might find out. So he—"

It is impossible.

"He what?" I whisper, faintly, clutching at the bedsheets until my knuckles turn white.

"He injected the daughter with cancer cells." At those words, Peril trembles uncontrollably. "There was someone, someone at your grandmother's house, that arranged it for him."

*The nurse, taking out a box and getting ready to give me a shot. Me, a little girl, refusing to cry, wanting to see my mother, even shaking my head when she asks if I want some candy. Then I watching her take another contrainer from her pocket and injecting that to me instead.*

*"It's good for your body. It's very expensive, but it's a present from your mother, because she wishes you well. But you have to keep it a secret, or I can't come anymore."*

*One day, perhaps during the sixth or seventh visit, I am telling Anaconda about the shots. She suddenly stares at me, her eyebrows together in shock and fury. "Really? Who told you? Since when? She took it from her pocket? Are you sure?"*

*Leaving, to come back after one year. Then leaving forever.*

Deathbringer killed my father. It's not like I haven't wondered before— who ordered him to? My stepfather popped into my head at once, but I assured myself that I didn't know my father's enemies. That if it had been him, he would have killed me too.

What if he had chosen a different way?

"If you aren't telling the truth, Peril, I will— I—" I am shaking, from fear, from disbelief, from hatred. I meet her eyes fiercely, and at the moment I want to hurt even her. Anyone. Anything.

She nods and takes out her phone. "My father's name is Chameleon. And he lives according to his name. He somehow gets friendly with rich, famous people, become whatever they want him to become, suck out their secrets and use it against them. When he has their fatal secrets, he can control them in any way he likes." A recording comes out, and although the sound is muffled, I can hear the words clearly. It is the voice of my stepfather. Telling Peril's father— Chameleon— everything that Peril told me just now.

I'm still running away, refusing to believe it. "If you edited it—"

"Why would I, Glory?"

I grab my head, and finally I am scared, scared for my life and everyone else's. "I don't know. Why wouldn't you?" I am shaking frantically. "Why do you tell me this now, Peril?" Why now? Why not hold it yourself forever?

Peril pauses. "Scarlet would have killed me if I had told you before. Because the love and support she gets is all from Chameleon, and for him to fall would mean the same for her. But I convinced myself that it was the right thing to do. That you deserved to know. That Clay would have wanted it."

She presses her lips together. "But I'm not brave, and I wouldn't have come if I hadn't had Scarlet's greatest secret in my hands. Glory, as much as I hate him, I'm like my dad." She gives me a bitter smile. "I sucked her secrets and now I'm using them against her."

# [38] Mom

**Caution: Mentions suicidal, depressing thoughts, fights and harsh words**

☆Glory☆

*"What is the life of a human being—a drop of dew, a flash of lightning?*

*This is so sad, so sad."*

-Ryonosuke Akutagawa, The Life of a Stupid Man

☆

Why?

What would urge a man to kill another man and inject cancer cells into his daughter? A man not over forty. A child not older than seven.

*Why?*

How could he live on after doing these kinds of things? How could he not get crushed under the heaviness of his conscience? How could he brag about it? How could he not be punished, but admired, respected, praised?

I shudder, lying on my bed after sending Peril and Greatness away, demanding to be alone. I stare at the darkness, at my white ceiling. The cells, the cells that are killing my cells, the cells that are spreading over my body like black paint, infecting me, turning me into a dark, dark thing— *they are not my own.*

I suddenly feel an urge to pinch every one of them out, out of my body, to even stab myself to achieve it. I feel disgusted at them, at the cells that have become mine, the cells that have become my cells, and it slowly grows into a hatred of myself. I actually think of

reaching for something, a glass shard, a knife, anything— but my body is too *heavy*.

*If only I had not existed.*

*If only I was not born.*

For the second time in my life, I really wish for death. I call on it in the darkness, demand for it to take me, beg. Tears fall from my eyes, sliding down both cheeks, but I really am not feeling anything. Just emptiness. Just the wish for death, silent and calm. Realizing that there are some things that I can't bring myself to face.

I had dreamed of it a million times, the day I knew why my father died. Every night, even, on this very bed, staring at the same ceiling. And if it was caused by a human, how I would get revenge. How I would make sure the person that did it would suffer as much pain as I did. To tear that person to shreds.

*No, Glory,* I say to the girl lying on the bed, me of the past. *You really don't want to know. You are better off not knowing. You are happier.You don't want to die. Not really. Not like this.*

☆

The next morning, I am facing the truth before I know what I am doing. I demand a drive to my mother's house, determined. Grandmother seems to think that I miss Anaconda, that I want to say good bye to her for the last time. Perhaps that's why she lets me go, although it must be obvious to her what a horrible state I am in. I can barely walk without help. But I must go. I am almost surprised at myself, that I had this much strength. But it is my duty. I have to tell them, to get Jambu and Anaconda away from that monster. I have to punish him, somehow. I have to get him arrested. Is that possible? I don't know. But I have to do something.

"Maybe you can call her here, and the three of us will have a nice talk," Grandmother offers, but I shake my head. Even if Anaconda and I talk alone, there's a chance that Grandmother, or anyone, will overhear us. What if she doesn't come? Refuses to see me?

"I'll contact her and let her know that you are coming," Grandmother says, a little hesitant, softly holding my hand for a second before she lets go. "She'll be glad to hear from you, Glory, I know it." She offers me a watery smile.

"Thank you." A million thank-you's wouldn't be enough.

I get on the car and drown in my thoughts, not hearing the casual words the driver offers to me. *What if I meet that man, instead of Jambu or Anaconda? I'm afraid that I'll kill him. Or worse, that I would shake in fear. Frozen. Unable to do anything.*

To my surprise, my mother is waiting for me when I arrive at her house after a forty minute drive. There are no helpers, no servants, at least I can't see any. I wonder if they have been cleared because of my visit. She leads me to the house. "Glory. Did you get better? Are you feeling okay? You look so tired and exhausted," Anaconda says, touching my face. I realize with a chill that her touch is very similar to Grandmother's. It goes as fast as it came, however.

My heart starts thumping, clear and loud, I am I'm gasping for air. I reach out and grip the hand that has always been snatched away from me. Holding it tight so she won't leave me again. "Anaconda. Is your husband here?"

*Your husband is a murderer.*

Anaconda turns back to me, her eyes staring at our hands. "No, Glory. Does he make you feel uncomfortable? If he is, I—"

"Where is he? When is he coming back?" I insist. "It's important."

"When Jambu heard that you were coming, he asked his father to go to the gym. He thought you would be uncomfortable, and I guess he was right. That man wouldn't have gone out for anything else, you know, he was so surprised. Jambu and he don't have a good relationship, not really. He really is so spiteful sometimes." She looks at the huge clock at the other side of the room. "They'll be out for at least three hours. Jambu told me they were coming back with dinner, so." She beams. "I'm so glad to see you out of the hospital, Glory. Are you sure you're okay, though? Want to sit down?"

I shake my head firmly. "I came here because I just couldn't say it through the phone. I know you won't believe me, but you--" I pause, looking around the house. "Are you sure he went out?"

She looks surprised. "Yes, I waved to him myself. What's the matter?" She stares at me intently. "Why are you avoiding him? Is there a particular reason? Is it because of the meeting last time? I remember it, I don't know why he behaves like that, I mean, I do, but..."

I watch Anaconda. I watch her swift movements, her smiles, her thin, long fingers that just touched my cheek. It's like all of her has been unlocked to me at once, the things that I never even dared to imagine.

The word just blurts out of my mouth, like it has a mind of its own. And perhaps it does. Perhaps I have thought of it so much, hoped for it and prayed for it, hated it, that a part of my soul has melted into it. I have given it mind and body.

"*Mom*."

One word, one simple word. A word all of my friends say every day. Filled with so much love, sometimes stress, sometimes dislike and fury. But love is always there, hidden, packed in there with all the emotions, because such a beautiful world like that cannot be said without a little bit of love. Care and softness all stuffed into this small, gentle word. A word that I have, all my life, never dared to say.

I can only hope that it's as important to Anaconda as it is to me.

Anaconda snaps her head to stare at me, her mouth closed shut. What's in her eyes? Fear? Caution? Sadness? Pity? I can never read her.

"Your husband," I take a deep breath,"is a murderer." *You're the only one that I can tell this to. The only one that can understand my pain. The only one who knew my father as well as I did. Believe me. Believe me, Anaconda.* "He ordered to kill my father. The man you loved. Right? You said you loved him. He—was— *murdered*."

I can't bear to look at her expression. I am staring firmly at the floor, my heart thumping. Even the floor is getting blurry now.

What would she think? That I'm crazy? Maybe she's just listening to me because I only have a few numbered days left. But I tell myself that I have to go on, for her and Jambu.

So I look at her blonde hair, so similar to mine. Curly and long, barely brushing her shoulders, with small streaks of brown in them. "And you know what he did? He injected cancer cells into me. There's this assassination group that does that kinds of things. Can you believe it?" My voice is rising, hysterical. "I know you can't, but I have a recording of him saying it. You have to believe me." I muster the courage to look at her. Her smile has faded away. "*Please* believe me."

She doesn't say a word.

Have I imagined what her reaction would be last night? In the car? Maybe unconsciously. One, she would think I'm crazy and never meet me again. Maybe send me to a mental hospital. Two, she would believe me. Why? How? I didn't go to that part. A part of me liked to believe— just because I'm her daughter. Because my words have value to her.

How many times have encountered it in so many novels? The very novels I used to prize, the ones I read over and over again, trying to, even for a short moment, convince myself that I was this much loved, this much trusted and prized. The mother and daughter unite, and they believe each other. They keep each other safe. Although there's some struggles and fights between them, in the end they always apologize to each other. They learn to love the other more.

Maybe I thought I might have this small happy ending. That Anaconda, whatever she did in the past, would believe me now. Would love me as who I am. We even had a talk of my father at the hospital, and I had seen how she changed, how she acted a little more affectionate toward me.

Is it selfish to even hope, a little bit, she would put me first?

That's why I didn't think about ending three.

"Mom." But the magic word doesn't seem to work anymore. "Anaconda. Say something." I pull at her hand, forceful, my voice rising. "Say I'm crazy! Say you have no idea what I'm talking about! *SAY SOMETHING*!"

*Say the expression on your face is not what I think it is.*

"Glory, I'm sorry." Anaconda grabs her hand away, not looking at me. And I'm that little girl again, still chasing that black car, trying to get a glimpse of this beautiful woman. "I wanted to tell you, but you know, you're still a girl, it would be too hard on you. You can't imagine how angry I was when he told me, and Glory, he regrets it a lot. Glory, please, I'm so sorry..." She sobs, holding her face in her hands, as I watch her, breathless.

I don't even know what I'm feeling now. It's like my heart is too heavy and I'm dragging it on the floor and Anaconda's just stomping on it without even knowing that she's stomping it, that's the worst part of it all, over and over again. I don't even feel sad, but tears are suddenly welling up in my eyes and just spilling all over my face. I just blink, over and over again, trying to look at Anaconda, but it's like the floor is swallowing me and I don't know where I am anymore.

"You knew all this time?" Every part of me-- the little girl I used to be, the girl I am now-- is forcing me to ask her this one question. "Really?" Really? *Really?*

Anaconda crumples to the floor. "When I heard it, G-Glory, I couldn't even look at him for days. Despite everything, I do love you, Glory, I really do, I loved your father and I love you more than anything. But you know, I can't divorce him, please try to understand, angel, he'll ruin everything that I have worked for, my entire career," I'm still staring at the spot she used to be. "I'm so sorry, I'll apologize instead, please don't tell anyone--"

"How can you say those words to me?" But I can't even muster anger anymore. It's like every part of me is wrecked up. Contorted and twisted and just beat up into whatever I am now. "How? How

can you even look at me? How can you talk to me? How can you touch my cheek? How can you smile at me?" I want to pull out her hair, but I can't see where she is, so I pull on mine, the remaining of what's left anyway. "I'm dying. Do you know that? I'm doing to die and your husband fucking caused this all. And--" I'm laughing like a maniac. "You knew *all this time*." I blink through my tears and somehow manage to grab her shoulders and shake her. "You talked about my dad when you knew all about this. How dare you? How dare you say you love me? How dare you say you loved him? How can you go on living with that monster, you are just a monster yourself, you filthy bitch, you're always like this, aren't you, just wreck my life and never even tell me anything?" I can't even breathe anymore, so I let go and just fall to the floor. "YOU ALWAYS PUT YOUR FAME OVER ME! All you care is about your reputation, you, I hate you..." Blocking my ears with my hands, knees next to chest. Rocking back and forth, muttering words that's unfathomable even to me. Or maybe I'm screaming.

I pass out.

# [39] Destroy

☆Deathbringer

"The last day of a free man, is that it?"

Mother's glaring at Morrowseer, seething in his presence. She almost passed out when I told her that he was working at my school. "You stupid idiot. Why would you ever turn yourself in, eh? Just forget it and enjoy life."

I am worried that Mother would kill him (not for his death, I would love it, but the thought of my mother having the guilt of killing such a filthy being), so I hurriedly reply, "Are you sure you want to treat me like this? When I am the key to meeting your only daughter, the bridge to give them some money, an angel that offers a chance to act like a decent father, or let me say, a decent human being, which you have had hard time doing in the past—"

"I get it, boy, I don't want your remarks," Morrowseer grumbles. "Get on with the plan."

"Moon's a sweet thing, I can't believe she's your daughter," I say in return. "Okay. I'm just going to get you in Glory's house, introduce you as my uncle, which, unfortunately, you are, and disappear to see how Glory is doing. And tell her what I'm planning to do tomorrow. Don't say a word, don't make Secretkeeper or Moon realize who you are, just be content at watching and sipping tea. Remind yourself of the trashy things you have done to Secretkeeper, like leaving her pregnant, how much pain she must have been in, and realize what a monster you are. Maybe next time— if there is a next time— you can give them some money. I think that's all."

Morrowseer stares at me in disbelief. "The plan was this simple, and you never helped me when I asked for help?"

Now it's Mother's turn to stare at him and grip his collar. Her face is red with fury. "YOU ASKED HIM FOR HELP, YOU SAW HIM AT SCHOOL, YOU TALKED TO HIM—"

"I was his damn teacher, Quickstrike, wasn't I?" Morrowseer grumbles. "Or maybe you can just give the money to them. No need for me to go in. Just give it as a Christmas present or something."

"One, you're acting like a coward, two, it's not Christmas, and three, why would I listen to your wishes when I can see you miserable?"

"You gave birth to a demon, that's what he is," Morrowseer snaps, but he nods, grabbing his car keys. He motions for me to come. If I didn't know him, I would even say that he looks excited. "You don't want to be late to your girlfriend, the sweetheart doesn't have much time."

I punch him in the stomach for that remark, and he groans in pain. I dart to the door even faster than he does, wanting to see her. Because, unfortunately, he tells the truth. Before going out, however, he turns to Quickstrike and throws her a brown bag. "Quickstrike, I liked you better when you were killing people, but since you're insisting on living as a kind, good person, you'll need some more money. And don't stay contact with men you don't have feelings for, just ask me if you need more." When she just holds it in her hand, he sighs. "I worked to get it, it's not dirty money."

Mother gives him a grudging smile of gratitude. I turn to him, grabbing his shirt to stop him from going. Lowering my voice, I ask him, "You knew? You were watching us?" *But you don't care about us.* He scoffs and goes out of the house.

"Tell me how Glory's doing, when you come back, will you?" She calls out.

I reply, but almost certain that she doesn't hear it— I'm already out of the house. Eager to have a glimpse of Glory.

☆

When I go in, there isn't Glory, but Greatness, a grim expression on

her face. I can hear her talking furiously with Secretkeeper. I immediately fear the worst. "Where is she?"

Severkeeper is the one that answers me. At the sound of her voice, Morrowseer, hidden underneath his black cap, freezes. "She went to meet her mother. And Mrs. Bright followed her after an hour, just to see how things were going."

I immediately relax. "Oh."

Greatness realizes who I have brought, and eyes me in horror. She motions to take him away, and I'm starting to realize what a bad idea it is, but he stands firm. "Are there any other people in the house, then?" Secretkeeper, who was offering a cup of tea to the both of us, almost drops the teacups. I turn back to show him my horrified expression— he wasn't supposed to say a word—but he ignores me.

"*You*," she whispers, and I inch away from Morrowseer and sit next to Greatness sheepishly. She blinks for a couple moments, and then gives him a radiant smile. "You must be Deathbringer's— father? Uncle? Brother, maybe?"

Morrowseer stares at her, gently taking off his cap and setting it on the kitchen table. Secretkeeper's eyes follow him in disbelief. "Of the sort,"he replies. He looks around, probably searching for Moon, and Greatness sighs.

"Delightful. What tea can I offer you? Deathbringer, I'll give you your green tea right away, Miss— Glory will be here soon."

Greatness snorts. "I'm glad you can still say her name without the slightest prick of your conscience."

Morrowseer and I talk at the same time. "What are you talking about?" "Why are you acting so haughty to a woman you don't even know, little brat?"

Secretkeeper frowns at her, opening her mouth as if to say something, but ignores her. "Deathbringer, what would your— uncle, brother, whatever— like for tea?"

"I have no idea," I reply as I throw a questioning look at Greatness. She's busy glaring at Secretkeeper.

"Moonbeam tea, please," Morrowseer says, staring intently at Secretkeeper. Her face contorts in disgust, so much that I even feel a little sorry for him.

"We don't have any." Secretkeeper's voice is sharp.

"But that's your favorite flower." I dig my face into my palms. *Oh God.*

Secretkeeper stares at him for one moment, three peaceful seconds, before she reaches out and grabs his hair, screeching, a sound that I have never heard before.

"You. *You. YOU*!" She pulls and pulls, that after a second of suppressing the urge to laugh at his face, I try to hold her. Morrowseer seems to have gone limp, without any thought of fighting back. "I promised myself, that the moment I saw you, I would pull every hair out of your body, I would kill you, I would beat you up—"

Greatness stands, and I'm afraid that she'll beat Morrowseer up when she has the chance, because then I'll lose control of myself and join in. But she only takes Secretkeeper's arm and shouts for her to calm down.

"I'll KILL YOU!" Secretkeeper screams hysterically. Her arms don't reach Morrowseer anymore, and as if to satisfy her, he keeps punching himself. I give him a kick to help, but he doesn't seem to notice. "I HATE YOU, MOON HATES YOU, YOU LITTLE FILTHY ANIMAL, HOW DARE YOU COME BACK NOW THAT YOU HAVE NO MONEY—"

"I do have money," Morrowseer says, softly. "I came here to give you some, not to ask for forgiveness, I know I don't deserve it, but just..."

"I loved you, I left everything just to love you, I bore you a daughter, and you, you filthy animal, you never came back, you

deserve to die, to fall into the pits of hell, no, you're a demon yourself, aren't you!" Her voice becomes higher and louder. "I used one last penny trying to find you, because I didn't want Moon to live fatherless, because I loved you, and when— when I got hold of some money—" she suddenly shudders. "I knew I shouldn't take it but I did, just to find you, to see if you were safe..." She takes her face in her hands, sobbing completely. "And this girl here— she's telling me that it was harmful for Miss Glory, I caused her harm, all because of that filthy money..."

"What?" It's my turn to be panicked, angry. "What are you saying? What caused Glory harm?"

At that moment, someone opens the door. Moon comes in, a grocery bag in her hands, her eyes widening at the sight. She drops the ingredients and runs to her mother. "What's happening? Why are you crying, Mom?"

Secretkeeper doesn't reply, and just hides herself even more with her hands, as if ashamed to show Moon such a sight. "Nothing, nothing," Secretkeeper says and mumbles something unfathomable.

"You were screaming, I heard it," Moon protests, looking around. Her eyes focus on Greatness, and then Morrowseer. "What happened here?" She spits the words out, her green eyes cold and unforgiving. She protectively shields her mother from the two of them.

When Morrowseer doesn't say a word— he, too, looks ashamed— Secretkeeper sighs, wiping her eyes and standing up. "Nothing, I just got excited, you know how my emotions get up and down sometimes."

There's a long silence. "You're my biological father, aren't you," Moon spits, looking down at Morrowseer. Morrowseer looks up at her, as if drawn to her voice. His eyes search her face despairingly. Yet, he doesn't say a word.

"Don't say such nonsense to Deathbringer's uncle. Or brother."

"Tell me the truth." Moon's voice is the opposite of Secretkeeper's: it gets lower and quieter. "Are you my biological father?"

I don't know what I imagined would happen if Morrowseer selfishly introduced who he really was to the two of them. I thought Secretkeeper would be angry— she had every right to— but Moon? I just couldn't imagine her angry. She just seemed like an eternally happy person.

Morrowseer glances at Secretkeeper, and when she nods, he chokes out, "I am."

Moon narrows her eyes, and her voice is ice. "I have no idea why you came here, or how you had the nerve to do it, but I assure you that I have never in my life considered you as my father and I never will." She pauses as if to let the words sink in. "We are living happily, without and no thanks to you, and I hope you realize how selfish it was for you to come to us to ask forgiveness, or even to just see us— you have no right. I, for one, will never forgive you, will never accept you as a father, or a human being. I sincerely ask you to walk out of this house right now, and never return."

Morrowseer stares at her dumbly, nods, and walks out of the house. I try to go after him, but Greatness holds me back, pointing to Moon and the tears that are falling from her face.

I make both Secretkeeper and Moon hot chocolate, and apologize for being inconsiderate of their feelings by bringing him. I would have asked questions on how we are relatives, but they seemed too shocked to think of it. They just nod silently, and although teardrops keep dropping on that hot chocolate, nobody says a word.

☆

Glory still hasn't come back after a couple hours, and I turn to Greatness as we wait in her room. I'm prancing in nervousness. "You think something happened to her?"

"It's only been a few hours, I expect she needs some time to talk to her mother. It might be the last," Greatness answers flatly.

I close my mouth shut— Greatness doesn't seem to want a conversation. But then I realize that I have something to tell her. That she, of all people, deserves to know. "I'm going to turn myself

in tomorrow. I talked to Mother about everything, and she agreed."

Greatness, looking gloomy and worried before, genuinely brightens at the news. "That's great, Deathbringer."

I play with my fingers, pondering, and finally ask her: "What Secretkeeper said about Glory. Do you know anything about it?"

Greatness thinks for a moment, and shakes her head. "I can't tell you. At least, I have to tell Glory first. But I think she'll agree to not tell you."

"What is it?" I'm distressed. "How long did you know it? How can't you tell me?" When she doesn't reply, I can't bear it. "What is it? Is it good news or bad news?"

"Bad. She knows the worst part, but she doesn't know about Secretkeeper."

"Then she'll tell me," I say, more confident than I feel.

Greatness blinks, as if she hasn't considered it. Her eyes become wary. "If I tell you, you'll do something rash. I know it."

"Is it that bad? Then you must tell me."

"Promise." She's saying the words slowly, not wanting to say them. "Promise me that you'll be in prison tomorrow. That no matter what, you'll turn yourself in. That what I tell you today won't change your decision."

I stare at her, daunted by the news already. "I promise." *I'm not the boy I used to be, Greatness.*

"Glory's stepfather." Greatness takes a deep breath. "He was the client that ordered the assassination. I didn't know who did it until yesterday, but as I was going back to Glory's room, I heard it. The thing is"— she sneaks a look at me, that wary look in her eyes— "he injected cancer cells into Glory when she was young. Secretkeeper helped the nurse come in the house with the other shots. Glory's grandmother thought that they were flu shots. I thought Secretkeeper knew what it was, because she accepted the money,

but apparently she didn't."

I try to take it all in. Glory's stepfather? Anaconda's husband— he was the client, the one that ordered me to kill Glory's father, the one that *injected cancer cells—?*

"You're sure about this?" My voice is quiet.

"Absolutely sure."

I suddenly stand up. My brain is pitch-white, wiping out everything. I am familiar with this feeling, this white fury, this hot anger, the boiling fire that threatens to run over. The urge for violence. I am an animal, only answering to my senses, to kill, to destroy, I don't know who I am. My brain becomes calm, and I quickly scan the image of him I have in my head, where he is, where he can be, what weapon can be used—

"I knew you would want to kill him," Greatness says, a disgusted look on her face, but she's only an obstacle now. I push her away and reach for the door. "That's all you know how to do."

I have no time. *You made a promise to your mother,* a voice whispers, but the fury swallows it again, the image of Glory burning in my mind, and it's kill and kill and kill all over again. Greatness, always going on about justice, about law and no violence. What does she know? She has never killed anyone, and she acts holy because of it, but does she know anything? I laugh maniacally.

"Your philosophy only defends monsters," I spit out.

"Killing him won't be enough." Greatness' voice is clear, cutting through my fury. Punching me back to my senses. "He'll only laugh at us even if we succeed. He'll be remembered as the target of assassination. There might be documentaries about him."

Greatness turns her eyes at me, and I realize for the first time there there's a similar anger in her, too. "I, on the other hand, am planning to destroy him completely."

# [40] Fault and Blame

**Caution: mentions of suicide**

☆Glory☆

*"I am too young*

*And I have loved you too much"*

*-The Brothers Karamazov, Fyodor Dostoyevsky*

☆

*The  girl in the picture set on Grandmother's lamp table, always covered with a handkerchief, is beautiful. Even though I can only sneak a peek at a time-- barely three seconds-- I can still draw the girl's face in my mind. Long, curly blonde hair, similar to mine, and a round face. I don't remember much about anything except her eyes. I don't know the color or the shape (I note to look it up later), but the eyes are something that erase everything about the face, only allowing a faint image of the eyes to linger. Perhaps there was something smeared on her face. Or pimples. But the eyes stare right at the six-year-old me, daring me to think of anything other than the world 'beautiful'.*

*As I grow older, I wonder, what makes it so breathtaking? The eyelashes? The color? But I finally settle down on one conclusion: those are the eyes of a mad person. She seemed-- even then, when she was young-- to search for something, some bigger light. It was like she was staring at something, obsessed, unsatisfied.*

*And I was right. She kept moving, following that perfect light, always searching for more.*

*She left Grandmother. She left her husband, my father, and then me.*

☆

When I wake from my dream, I see Grandmother sitting by my side.

Her hand is next to mine, but she isn't holding it, like she's afraid I will turn to dust if she touches me.

Grandmother is an old lady. Living with her for a few years, there are a lot of things I know about her. The things that would never change. She is strict. She always speaks in a soft voice, because she knows her voice would be heard no matter what. She is old-fashioned. She used to have a picture of Anaconda in her room.

Her hands are so wrinkled, with veins visible underneath the skin that barely tops over it. I stare at it for a long time, thinking, remembering. Reminding myself, as I hold that beautiful hand, of what keeps me here. I realize that my list cuts off after a while. The other list goes on and on.

Grandmother wakes at my touch. Her voice is lispy. "You should try to get some--"

I cut her off, because if she goes on, I know I can never ask her. "Grandmother, I want to ask you something serious." I grip the blanket. *I'm sorry. I know I'm being selfish.* Her eyes widen, and she almost seems scared to hear my next words. "Can I speak to you about it?"

"Glory." She shakes her head. I can tell that she knows what I'm going to say. "Rest. It's been a long night, I don't want to..." Her voice trails off, breathing in shakily.

"Grandmother," I say gently. I grip her hand tighter. "I don't want you to be like this anymore. Always worrying about your granddaughter. I should be taking care of you, but I've never done anything in my life that was helpful. I want you to enjoy your life. Not this. I don't--" I'm choking on my words. "I don't want this situation to go on any longer, okay?"

"Is it because of your illness, Glory? Because we can fight through it, I promise. It'll be okay, I'm so sorry that you have to go through this, I'm sorry..." Grandmother is sobbing. Her fingers brush over my pulse almost unconsciously, as if she's trying, for the hundredth time, to convince herself that I am alive.

"Grandmother, did you know?" I clasp her hands, holding it to my cheek. *Did you know that Anaconda's husband has been injecting cancer cells into my body? Did you know he killed my father? And that Anacondra knew but never told me?* Grandmother stares at me, her eyes questioning. So she doesn't know. That's when I realize, she must never know. "I've never wanted to die before. I loved my life." It's like they've crushed my soul into pieces. "But now, I'm not so sure anymore. Everything-- everyone-- they're so cruel, Grandmother." I'm digging my fingernails into my palm. *So, so cruel.* "And I'm *so young*. You know? I was just a little kid. I still am. But everybody is just-" I cover my face, ashamed to look at her. "-they're *monstrous*."

*I'm too young, Grandmother, and I have loved too much.*

"What happened, Glory? Talk to me." Grandmother presses her forehead against me. "Is it about your mother? If it is, don't take it out on yourself. Take it on me."

When I start to protest, she shakes her head. "Anacondra is that way because-- listen to me-- I was abusive when she was younger. My husband cheated on me, you know, and I was so desperate that I wanted to prove her perfectness to him. Even after he left, I insisted her on being beautiful and perfect because I didn't want anyone talking of me being a single mother. That somehow it affected Anaconda badly, that without that man, I wouldn't be able to raise her like I should. I hated it, and I demanded more and more of her, her reputation more than anything else. I never asked her about her feelings. The only important thing was what everyone else thought. And I realized much later, much too late, there was nothing more unimportant." She pauses, breathing softly, as if she can't bring herself to go on. But she does.

"That's why she was obsessed with her surroundings, the people around her. Now, it's like a bad habit to her. She holds her reputation the highest. It's not about you, Glory. She really does love you, you know. I can see it. She just does everything that way, she hasn't realized it yet. And I hate it because I know how she will feel when she does realize her stupidity. Maybe she'll hate me even more after that. I would deserve it. It's all my fault." Grandmother sobs, clutching her chest. "Glory, take it out on this woman. Don't

keep such thoughts to yourself."

What a terrible cycle.

Grandmother's insecurities created Anacondra, who married a monstrous husband, who ordered Battlewinner, who ordered Deathbringer, who killed my father. Who is it to blame? Whose fault is this? Does it end with me? Me, who Anacondra abandoned, who wants to die? Does it ever end?

"Grandmother, why is everything so cruel to us?" Silence. Because she doesn't know, either. It seems to me that nobody does. "Why are we living like this? What have we done?...We only wanted a good family. A happy life. So why are we going through this? When will this end?"

"I don't know, Glory, I don't know."

*Grandmother, I don't want to live like this anymore. They have destroyed me. I am no longer the person I used to be.*

"I want to go to Switzerland." The words are just silent and calm, like I'm saying them underwater. Tears are just slipping down my face, wetting my palms. And I feel so empty. And yet, I am heavy, dragging myself on this bed, sinking, sinking, without knowing why I am sinking, because I'm terribly empty. It's the worst feeling in the world. "I'm sure they would approve of my condition, and let me have a peaceful-- an unpainful--"

*Death.*

I just can't say the word out loud.

☆

Letter #1

*To Deathbringer.*

I know I promised to write to you when we went to college. Believe me, I wanted to. Maybe I'll write another letter, acting in that pretend game again. But even then, I would know that such a thing

is impossible. So I write now, hoping that this letter would make you understand me. To make you, the love of my life, a little less miserable. Would it? I hope so. I don't know.

The truth is, I haven't written a letter to you since you turned yourself in. It hasn't been long since I heard the news, since I woke up in the hospital. I haven't even visited. I just don't know what to write to you. Maybe, a part of me wants to cherish our last moment together, the happy memories when we forgot everything and just loved each other. I'm afraid that if I go back, and say my plans to you, I will ruin everything.

I want to hear your voice, I want you next to me, but I know that would be too selfish. So I keep writing letters over and over again, hoping you'll see them someday.

Another reason is that I can't possibly tell you this in person. I am ashamed to tell you, when you are being so brave, that I'm running away.

Deathbringer, I'm going to die. I'm going to Switzerland. After a long talk with Grandmother, we agreed to contact a hospital in Switzerland. They specialize in assisted suicide. Since I'm in the last stages of my leukemia, we're both pretty sure they'll accept.

Once, I saw a note you wrote for me. I read it so many times that I have it memorized by heart.

You sad that on cool nights you look up at the sky and tell yourself that it isn't your fault. That it was written on the stars. You said something about us being in a strange play to satisfy some heavenly power. Concluding that it was the fault in our stars that made us this way.

You were convinced that I would hate it, that I like to face things, even if it takes me a little while. In your eyes, I'm a girl that always turns back. A girl that never fails at facing things, because she's brave.

I thought so, too.

But you were wrong about one thing. The bravery doesn't come from me. It comes you. From Grandmother and Moon and all my friends at school and the people that love me. From Jambu and maybe Anaconda. The ones that trust me. The fact that I'm not alone.

With them, I can fight through anything.

...Isn't it funny? Because once one person-- Anacondra-- turned away, everybody seemed to be okay without me. And I kept erasing everyone until I was completely by myself. Alone and helpless, facing the big monster that once seemed so small. Now, it is impossible to destroy.

And to be honest? I'm nothing without the people around me. I turn at the first chance and run away. I'm desperately closing my eyes, hoping that this isn't real. That this would all end.

Maybe you were right. Maybe I would have never felt this way, this empty, if I hadn't been Anaconda's daughter. If I had never been injected with cancer cells. If my father hadn't been killed. If the boy that killed him wasn't you, Deathbringer, the love of my life (see, this is why I can't show you those letters. Because then you would just blame yourself. I would hate myself if you did). Maybe, just maybe, if you were a normal boy, or if I was a girl that had nothing to do with your assassinations, I would just brush it off. And I would still have the last hope that I can go through this cruel world. Perhaps I would have lived happily, with my friends, with the people never leaving me. And I would be strong.

Deathbringer, I have nothing left.

Maybe the fault is in our stars after all. Maybe I can control none of those things, and it's not my fault. This was my fate, already written by some hand I don't know.

It's the last thing I hold on to. Because it's the only explanation where I don't have to blame myself.

*-Glory*